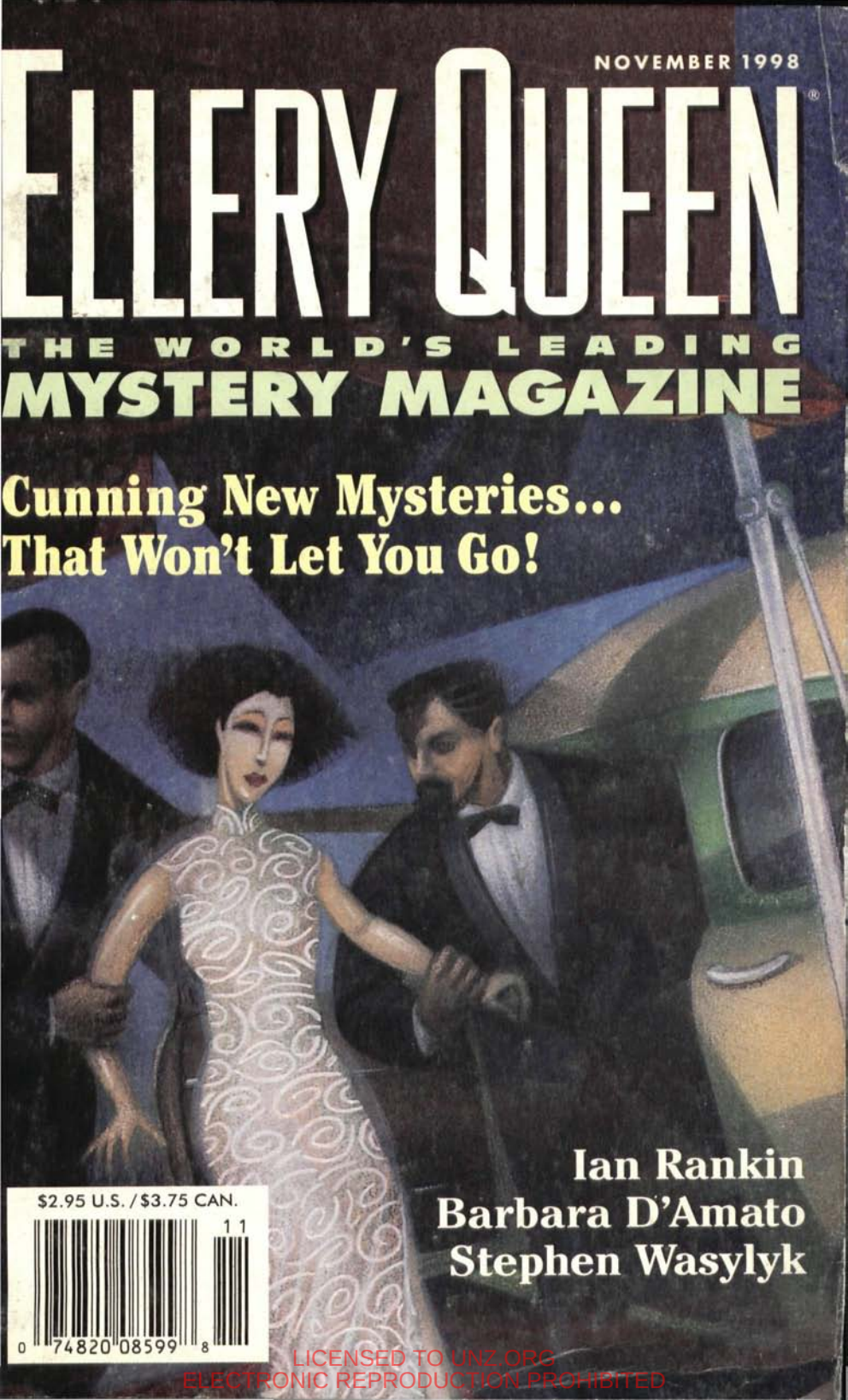

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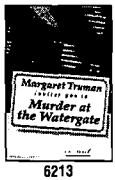

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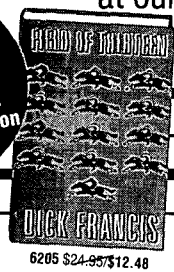

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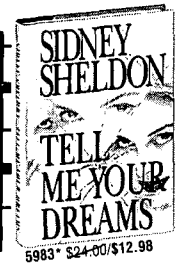

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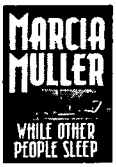

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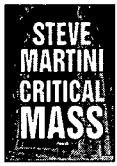

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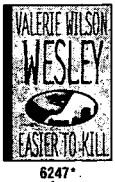

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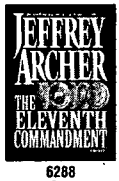

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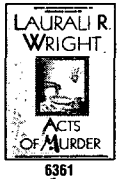

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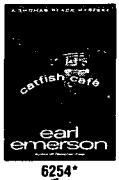

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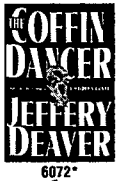

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New Poetry Contest $48,000.00 in Prizes

The National Library of Poetry to award 250 total prizes to amateur poets in coming months

Owings Mills, Maryland – The National Library of Poetry has just announced that $48,000.00 in prizes will be awarded over the next 12 months in the brand new North American Open Amateur Poetry Contest. The contest is open to everyone and entry is free.

"We're especially looking for poems from new or unpublished poets," indicated Howard Ely, spokesperson for The National Library of Poetry. "We have a ten year history of awarding large prizes to talented poets who have never before won any type of writing competition."

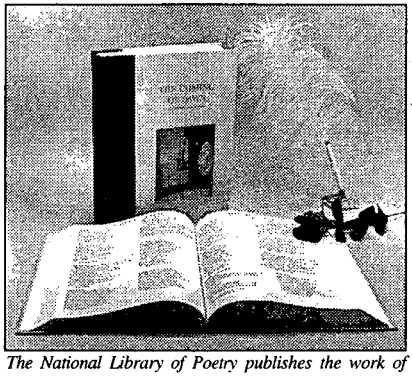
How To Enter

Anyone may enter the competition simply by sending in ***ONLY ONE*** original poem, any subject, any style, to:

The National Library of Poetry
Suite 6127
1 Poetry Plaza
Owings Mills, MD 21117-6282

Or enter online at **www.poetry.com**

The poem should be no more than 20 lines, and the poet's name and address must appear on the top of the page. "All poets who enter will receive a response concerning their artistry, usually within seven weeks," indicated Mr. Ely.



The National Library of Poetry publishes the work of amateur poets in colorful hardbound anthologies like ***The Coming of Dawn****, pictured above. Each volume features poetry by a diverse mix of poets from all over the world.*

Possible Publication

Many submitted poems will also be considered for inclusion in one of The National Library of Poetry's forthcoming hardbound anthologies. Previous anthologies published by the organization have included *On the Threshold of a Dream*, *Days of Future's Past*, *Of Diamonds and Rust*, and *Moments More to Go*, among others.

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Art by Mark Evans

REMEMBERING KAZARIAN

by Marjorie Eccles

Murder is never an end in itself. It is, on the contrary, only the beginning of things.

At any rate, that was what Kazarian said, and he should have known. He was Armenian by birth, and if anyone knows about murder, it is the Armenian nation—or what is left of it, after the genocide of 1915: that mass slaughter when nine-tenths of the nation was driven into exile, scattered to the corners of the earth, or driven by the Turkish janissaries into the desert and left there to rot, unburied, so that their bones whitened and are said to give off a phosphorescence in the dark, even yet.

Blood has watered the sparse soil of Armenia. Murder is written on its stones. Murder can never be forgotten, or forgiven. That was what Kazarian said.

Murder is what has brought Paul Enderby, a London lawyer in his mid forties, here to the capital of Armenia. It is why he is sitting on a wooden bench under a fig tree in a shadowed courtyard in Yerevan, too hot to do anything more than swat flies, drink strong wine, and watch the old men playing nardy, while he waits for Zarouhi. It is supposed to be the cool of the evening, but the stones of Yerevan hold the heat of

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the day. The city is a dust bowl between the bare hills, a city older than Babylon. Now magnificently resurrected from the ashes and ruins of its former self, it has wide main thoroughfares lined with grandiose buildings and monuments to Soviet power, constructed in Armenian tufa basalt and marble—blue, black, and rose-coloured, some of them splendid. Away from the main streets, concrete tower blocks of apartments dwarf the old, traditional flat-roofed houses, which theoretically should have been swept away long ago on the tide of modernization and reconstruction. But, as always in Communist-dominated cultures, reality overcame the intention. The long proboscises of countless building cranes still pierce the skyline, the endless mess of construction work goes on as it did ten years ago, and much of the city remains an unfinished building site. I shall be sorry, thinks Paul Enderby, if ever the old Yerevan disappears entirely, but I shall believe it when I see it.

Although she was born and raised in Yorkshire, England, Marjorie Eccles has chosen to set her crime novels in the English Midlands. Her best known books are the cozy, village police procedurals she began writing in the 1980s, featuring Detective Chief Inspector Gil Mayo. Before turning to crime, Ms. Eccles was a romance writer. Her first work for *EQMM* provides the romance of a foreign setting in a chilling tale of murder. ¶

Zarouhi works as a translator. She is attractive, almost as beautiful as was Paul's wife Arus, with that slender, dark-eyed grace which characterizes the young women of Armenia. But she is of a different generation, and where Arus was gentle and compliant, Zarouhi is vigorous and liberated. She has been to the state university and will not waste her time learning to cook and knit and bring up a family. Paul met her the first time he came to Yerevan, after Kazarian, who was distantly related to her, died. She was fourteen, and at the peak of her sexuality, for Armenian women mature early. She knows that he was charmed by her then, that he is free and unencumbered by a wife, and hopes she is the reason he has been drawn back again, after ten years. But everyone speculates as to why he is here—not least, Paul himself.

The first time he came he had done what his friend Kazarian had asked of him in the event of his death: He had taken the pouch containing dry, gritty soil from the homeland, cherished by Kazarian's family for seventy years and kept inside the polished copper urn in the niche beneath the sacred icon; he had scattered a handful over the coffin so that Kazarian, like his father, and his grandfather before him, was symbolically laid to rest in the native soil of his ancestors. Then, to those of his family who had miraculously survived the Holocaust, or who had returned from exile after a union with Russia made life possible again, Paul had transferred what their kinsman had left them—

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what was to most of them a fortune, but was in truth shamefully less than might have been expected, Kazarian's affairs being as they were at the time of his death. Finally, he had brought back to Yerevan the rusty key with which Kazarian's grandfather had locked the door of his house before being driven into exile.

It was the least he could do.

The counters click faintly as the old men move them across the board. The little fountain—there is always a fountain, that symbol of life, somewhere in Yerevan—tinkles coolness into the air. A fan of white doves clatters across the sky. From inside one of the houses, a caged bird sings its heart out against a background of raucous pop music. The Tataryan brothers, Stepanoc and Ezras, heat the grill in the corner of the courtyard and prepare meat to thread on long, swordlike skewers for the shashlik. An aroma of spices and burning charcoal fills the air. Children shriek and play the same sort of games children play everywhere. The women sit under the trees, knitting and gossiping.

Zarouhi is late, as she often is. She will arrive in a great rush of apologies, smart as a whip in her silk shirt and jeans, and toss her head at the disapproving looks of her mother. Her mother does not feel that her daughter's education has done her much good. Be that as it may, Zarouhi is naturally quick and intuitive, and if nothing else, has learnt persistence. She knows what she wants and she is determined she will get it, one way or another. She will not leave Paul alone, for instance, probing and questioning and making assumptions that are sometimes uncannily accurate.

He feels uneasy at the thought, and wonders once again at the compulsion that has made him return to this small, rocky country.

The first time he came was in springtime, when the air was mild and benign, and wildflowers bloomed on the mountains—pale yellow and mauve everlasting flowers, stiff and dry and wiry, conditioned by the lack of moisture in the thin soil. In the city, the apricot trees blossomed against rosy-domed churches; dark-robed, tall-hatted priests flapped past the fountains playing in Lenin Square. Now it is summer, the city is dust-clogged, and everything vibrates and shimmers in the dry, burning heat. On the mountainsides, little grows in the parched earth except bitter wormwood, the wild aromatic absinthe. The very rocks are scorched almost to vitrification.

Only Mount Ararat is eternally the same: cool, blue, and remote, glimpsed at every vantage point, a perfectly symmetrical, snow-capped peak suspended against the pinkish sky, where the Ark is said to have come to rest after the Flood and from whence Noah sent the dove across the waters, to return with a sprig of olive in its beak. Once part of Armenia, but now on the other side of the redrawn borders, Ararat belongs to Turkey, the old and not forgiven enemy, a potent symbol of all that was lost. Symbols and historical associations are part of the very fabric of Armenian life and culture. The sight of Yerevan's eternal flame, burning high above the city for the million lost souls who per-

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ished in the massacre, never fails to bring tears to Armenian eyes. Simply the thought of it had made Kazarian weep, though, admittedly, he wept easily.

He was a big, ebullient man with a deep bass voice, a huge rumbling laugh, and liquid brown eyes, which Paul's secretary said reminded her of Omar Sharif's. He had the same ability to turn women's heads; they went down helpless before his smile, willing to be seduced, although knowing he had no intention of marrying them. He was always larger than life, even when he and Paul were at school together, in the East End of London. A handsome lad, not clever, but sharp in the ways where money was to be made. He was as wily as a monkey but his charm, or an adroit lie, invariably got him out of trouble

His father had worked as a porter in one of London's leading hotels and was killed when a luggage trolley, overburdened with some VIP's expensive leather suitcases, toppled over on him, rupturing his spleen. His mother quickly remarried and departed elsewhere, leaving Kazarian to be brought up almost entirely by his grandparents within the refugee, immigrant community which had formed a small enclave in the district where Paul lived. From the day they were placed in adjoining desks at school, there was an immediate rapport between the two boys, despite—or perhaps because of—the differences in temperament and upbringing. They spent most of their spare time together as they grew into their teens, frequenting discos and football matches, experimenting with smoking, lager-drinking, and girls. Later, their paths began to diverge: Kazarian grew streetwise and successful, while Paul found it necessary to opt for the more boring but safer path of serious study. Even then, he was a conformable young man.

He never completely lost touch with Kazarian, however. As his friend, Paul had always been welcome to join in any gathering or celebration in the community of exiles, to drink with them the inevitable thick, sweet coffee and imported Armenian brandy, and he continued to see them, having none of Kazarian's impatience with the old men's reminiscences and yearnings for the homeland, none of his scorn for songs and poetry mingled with tears. On these occasions he was transported to another world from the drab, high-rise flat where he lived with his parents and sister. He fell in love with the idea of Armenia and its fiery history before he ever saw it.

"Tell me about London," says Zarouhi now.

"Again?"

"Again and again!" Her eyes are hungry.

They have driven out to this restaurant in the coolness of the mountains, out of the traffic-jammed streets, away from the smothering dust and the heat and noise of the city, whose lights wink far below in the darkness. They have eaten spotted trout, char-grilled meat, and red caviar, and Paul has, after the first mouthful, avoided something spongy and pale pink, some unspecified, processed part of an animal, said to be a delicacy. They have brought their glasses of brandy and

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tiny cups of coffee out onto the terrace. Zarouhi perches nonchalantly on the narrow parapet built above the vertiginously plunging ravine, its sides clothed with stunted oaks whose stubborn roots have somehow managed to find nourishment between the rocks.

Kazarian used to perch in just the same insouciant manner on the rail of his flashy cabin cruiser, glass in hand, careless of his safety though he could swim only a few strokes. But then, he always thought he had a charmed life.

Zarouhi puts a red-nailed hand on Paul's arm and repeats her request.

It is her one desire to leave Yerevan and go to London, which she imagines to be the acme of Western civilisation. "Yeraz" means dreams, and her head is too full of them, as her mother constantly tells her, to no effect. But it would not be so easy, even in these post-glasnost days, to find the means, or to cut through the red tape of bureaucracy and uproot herself. In any case, where would she, a foreigner, find work in London, Paul has several times asked her, among the thousands already unemployed? He reminds her of Kazarian's grandparents, arriving there during the depression via New York and France, after failing to make a new life in either place, and being forced to take the most menial jobs in order to survive . . . for what else was there for a wine grower and a carpet weaver, however skilled?

"Pooh!" she says, waving aside objections. He knows that she thinks he could help her, that he is rich—as, by her standards, he is. And there are other, unspoken thoughts hovering on the air. That her slim olive-skinned body is his for the taking, in exchange for the promise of what he can do for her. Not, he is certain, a virginal sacrifice. All the same, he is sorry for her, caught in a situation she can't change, but she is not, and never can be, Arus, and he says nothing.

After a waiting silence, she sighs and then returns to the attack, pointing out persuasively that, after all, Levron Kazarian, too, had once been poor, before he became wealthy beyond the imaginings of his kinsmen. Paul wishes she would change the subject.

He finds it impossible to explain Kazarian to any of them here, especially to Zarouhi, to convince her that his money was made as wildly and extravagantly as it was spent, that he came by it dishonestly, or at least by suspect wheeler-dealing, sailing always on the windy side of the law, and that if he had not died when he did, he would most likely have ended up in prison. She would not believe what she didn't want to believe. And she would wonder why Paul, as his friend and semi-official legal adviser, had done nothing to prevent it—and perhaps with some justification.

Loyalty to an old friendship had in fact made him try, only Kazarian wouldn't listen. He was on a tide of success, everything he touched was turning to money, he simply turned his back on the idea of inevitable retribution. And that was when they had to part company, in a business sense. Paul had pulled himself up by his bootstraps, he was one of

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the few from their comprehensive school who'd obtained a university place, and he was now a respectable and moderately successful lawyer. He intended it to remain that way. He couldn't afford to involve himself in dubious dealings that meant keeping his mouth shut, however generous the rewards. He not only had himself to think of—by then, he had Arus.

As with most of the important things in Paul's life, it was through Kazarian that he met Arus. Kazarian had, in fact, taken her out himself once or twice before they met, but when Paul made a beeline for her and Arus, flattered by his persistence, began to respond, Kazarian gave in gracefully enough. There were, after all, always plenty of other fish in the sea as far as he was concerned, though Paul noticed that whenever they met, he couldn't keep his eyes off Arus for long.

Whilst her parents would have preferred her to marry one of their own countrymen, they loved their only daughter too much to deny her anything, and as soon as Paul was able to provide her with a reasonable home, they were allowed to marry. They had an Armenian-style wedding, with a great deal of drinking and feasting after a solemn ceremony according to the rites of the Orthodox church. The guests threw sweetmeats for good luck and pushed paper money between Arus's fingers, pinning more onto her wedding dress as she danced with Paul, at once graceful and sensuous, to the haunting, evocative music of the Motherland. Kazarian gave them a handsome wedding present and wished them luck.

Their marriage, it seemed to Paul, was perfect, but it never does to be too complacent. Life has a habit of turning round on you when you least expect it, as he found when Arus died giving birth to the child she had wanted so passionately, for so long, and the child with her. It is something he cannot contemplate, even yet, without pain, overwhelming guilt, and despair.

Zarouhi drains her brandy and asks for another. She has drunk too much, so Paul pretends not to hear her request. Equality is still an ambivalent concept in this traditionally male-dominated society: To see a man drunk on wine, brandy, or vodka, or a combination of all three, is scarcely uncommon and is regarded with amused tolerance, but women are a different matter, and she has already attracted the unspoken but very evident disapproval of the waiters and too much attention from the other diners. Her mouth becomes sulky at his refusal so he sits beside her and smiles at her. He is a little unsteady himself.

The Armenians are a tenacious people, as witnessed by their struggles over the centuries against their innumerable enemies, from Assyrians and Turks to Tsarist Russians and Azerbaijanis, and Zarouhi is nothing if not true-born Armenian. But this tenacity is becoming somewhat tiresome as once again she harks back to Kazarian, citing him as the shining example of success, with his lavish lifestyle, his Mercedes, his Thames-side apartment, his glamorous women. News of all this reached even here and his name became a byword for munificence: On

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the rare occasions he visited his relatives he would arrive laden with gifts and spend money like water. The fact that he never invited any of them back to London to share his good fortune never seemed to have occurred to any of them. But to Paul he remarked scornfully that he found them backward and naive: The truth was at once harsher and more subtle, and Paul was angry at his contempt and lack of understanding. He recalls this as Zarouhi begins yet again to ask about Kazarian's boat and that last trip they took together, a topic which endlessly fascinates her and arouses her curiosity, and because this is something he doesn't want to talk about, he makes the mistake of saying shortly that Levron Kazarian had not been the plaster saint everyone thought him. And before he can stop himself, he adds bitterly that some people might have thought he had it coming to him when he fell off the rail of that floating gin palace he called a cabin cruiser.

They have machines here to split the stones, cracking and crushing them smaller and ever smaller in order to achieve something approaching a soil that can be tilled. Paul's thoughts would have been better left unexpressed, he realizes too late as, like the coiling nests of snakes revealed when those stones are lifted, Zarouhi's suspicion rears up, to be followed quickly by triumph. She does not need to say anything. He knows what she is thinking. He experiences a moment of panic.

He supposes she has reached the truth in the same way that he knew who the father of Arus's child was, by a combination of intuitive knowledge and deduction.

When Arus failed to conceive, he had refused to consider either of them undergoing the necessary tests, since he had no doubt of the cause of their childlessness. He had picked up a severe viral infection when he was at college, rumoured to leave one sterile, which at the time he'd dismissed as typical undergraduate humor, an unwarranted and feeble joke but one which now redounded sickeningly. So much that he couldn't bring himself to speak about it.

Although Arus was basically gentle and feminine, she had been born and educated in London and, like her contemporaries, had been taught to think independently. Above all, there was a core of something adamant in her, common to all Armenian women, who are proud and strong, their natures forged in the fires of adversity. That was something Paul should have remembered when an issue as important to her as that was at stake. He should have known that she would go ahead with her own tests, regardless. And afterwards . . .

She must have been told that the chances were that the fault lay within him, counted on the fact that for his part he would never consent to suffer those humiliating investigations, and would therefore never know for certain.

But if only she had turned to anyone else but Kazarian.

Paul is only too conscious of how Zarouhi's mind is working. He is beginning to have some inkling of what is in store for him, to see that he has given her the lever she has been looking for. She cannot possibly

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know how Kazarian died, or why, but she has instinctively homed onto his guilt, she senses that here is something he will do anything to avoid discussing, though there is no proof of what happened, there never will be. She moves closer to him, with such an expression of cold calculation on her face that he recoils with a dangerous backward movement that almost overbalances him. He wobbles, arms flailing. A moment passes while someone maneuvers past Zarouhi with a drink in his hand; then, just as Kazarian did, Paul loses his struggle. He goes over the edge with a scarcely perceptible sound that is magnified by Zarouhi's scream of horror, and by others as they join her to gaze down into that stony abyss where no human body can have survived. In the same way that Paul gazed down into the sea at Kazarian struggling to keep afloat before he raised the alarm, having waited just long enough for it to be too late.

But Zarouhi would swear that as Paul's body teetered on the parapet he could have saved himself, had he so wished.

In that split second before he made his choice, did Paul Enderby have doubts? Did it come to him that he may simply have imagined Zarouhi as his Nemesis, his goddess of retribution and vengeance? Did he wonder whether he might have been wrong about Kazarian and Arus? Or did he feel relief in surrendering at last to his punishment?

It hardly matters in the scheme of things. It is no more than another scratch on the scarred landscape, a tiny speck in Armenia's history of murder and bloodshed begun thirty centuries ago, and not yet ended. ●

INNOCENT UNTIL CAUGHT

by Ed Teja

I sat in a locked room,
shared it with a corpse.
I sat there quite puzzled,
it was a mystery, of course.
The question that challenged me,
the problem that I faced,
Was how to leave the room
and still not leave a trace.

I had to act quickly
and every clue erase;
And do it before the police came
to find me in this place.

For I couldn't let them find me,
and see I'd been having fun
In this locked room murder scene
with a smoking gun.

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GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS

by Stephen Wasylyk

Mrs. Baker heard her tenant descending the stairs for his walk as he did every morning at just about nine. Weather permitting, of course. He'd return about an hour later. Macklin, his name was, and he'd appeared in answer to her ad three months ago. Second floor, converted duplex in single home with large lawn, trees, and garage.

Pleasant enough, although a bit hairy to suit her with that gray hair, moustache, and beard, trimmed neatly though they were. Made him look like a recycled hippie. A good-looking one, however. A bit like Sean Connery, she thought.

Since he was the best the ad had brought, she'd had her attorney check him out. Her first tenant since she'd had the house remodeled. A widow living alone couldn't be too careful.

Nothing to worry about, the attorney said. Worked for the government, now retired. His banker says he can live anywhere he pleases, but gathered during a conversation that since he'd grown up in a house like hers, he wanted to revert to his boyhood for a time. Don't be surprised if he starts riding around on a bicycle. Hey, some men buy a bright red convertible and chase young blondes. Since he had money, maybe she should consider snagging him as a permanent resident, like with a marriage license.

Not unless he gets a shave and a haircut, she said. And says more than hello, good morning, and good night. One husband whose daily conversation consisted of an occasional grunt was enough for any woman.

Take the money every month and count your blessings, he said. You could have ended up with a pot-smoking kid with a boom box who would always be late with the rent.

Stephen Wasylyk's first fiction for *EQMM* appeared in 1977. Unless his estate should uncover and send us posthumous stories, the following tale will be Mr. Wasylyk's last for us. The talented Pennsylvania writer, who died in 1996, was a fighter pilot in WWII, and worked subsequently as a commercial pilot, a photographer, salesman, advertising copywriter, and art director. He began his fiction-writing career with *AHMM* in 1968. ¶

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The lawyer was probably right. At least Macklin was no bother. Went for his walk every morning, drove off at noon, and reappeared after dinner to spend a solitary evening upstairs. Had a TV up there hooked up to all the cable channels. And a computer. But she never heard anything.

Quiet was fine, but utter silence could be worrisome.

Whether he went right, left, or straight ahead at the corner, Macklin had timed an hour-long brisk walk in each direction, never taking the same route two days in succession.

Today he turned right, paralleling the main road with its sometimes heavy traffic, striding down a street lined with old elms and oaks. When he reached a section with newer homes and younger trees, he turned right to the main road and right again to head homeward.

Halfway along his return route, a small strip had been indented a car's length, to allow parking off the busy street for the benefit of an anachronism in the residential neighborhood—a pre-mall, brick commercial structure housing a drugstore on the corner, some sort of distributorship next to it with plate-glass windows covered by venetian blinds, a barber shop, and a delicatessen.

Since he passed every three days or so, he'd formed a wave-of-the-hand acquaintanceship with the druggist, a short, fat man named Phil, who somehow kept his business alive in the face of the competition from the big chains; the two barbers; and whoever happened to be at the cash register of the delicatessen—the people behind the blinds of the distributorship always hidden from view.

Engine purring, a car was angled at the corner in front of the drugstore as though waiting to make a right turn, but the passenger door hung open.

Macklin glanced into the drugstore as he passed, saw Phil waiting on a tall young man with queued hair. Phil looked up. Macklin waved. Phil looked away, not returning the greeting.

Macklin took six strides, turned into the distributorship as though he had business there, nodded at the quick smile from the young blond receptionist, and said softly, "Drugstore holdup. Call 911. Quickly."

Her eyes widened, she hesitated, saw something in his face and reached for the phone as Macklin stepped back to the window and peered through the slats of the blind, just as he heard a muffled thump from next door.

"Damn," he whispered.

The young man with the pigtail left the drugstore, moving fast but not running, stepped into the car with the open door, and the car took off, pausing before entering traffic long enough for Macklin to memorize the plate number; vanishing only moments before a township police cruiser pulled into the spot it had vacated.

It was the first time he hadn't returned at ten o'clock. Combining that with the sirens she'd heard, Mrs. Baker—known as Birdie to her card-

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playing friends—hoped he hadn't stepped in front of a car. The way some people drove these days, an old man in the street was fair game. She set off rapidly toward where she'd heard the sirens: a surprisingly slim figure with carefully tended hair who always wore timeless fashions and real leather shoes, ordered from catalogue houses because she wouldn't be caught dead in what retail stores had to offer a woman her age. If she could find her size.

All topped that morning by a worried expression on her still-pretty face. After all, she was his landlady and there was no one else.

She joined the small knot of spectators, to her great relief spotted him speaking with a policeman, and heard someone whispering. Phil was dead, shot during a holdup. The old guy with the beard? He saw it happen and called the police.

Poor Phil. She'd known him *so* many years. If Macklin had been a young man, he might have been able to help. Stupid thinking, she told herself angrily. Even youth couldn't prevail against a gun.

One of the cops said the two had already been caught because the alarm went out so fast, thanks to Macklin. He was an eyewitness, and everyone knew what that meant. A wasted court appearance every time he turned around because the defense attorney would get postponement after postponement, hoping Macklin would become disgusted or even die of old age before he could testify. Said a lot about defense attorneys and the justice system.

Not to mention that those two would come looking for him if they ever got loose. Only witness, right? Too bad about Phil, but who needed that kind of hassle?

Macklin entered a car with a stocky man who looked like a detective. Mrs. Baker went home. Just what she needed. A couple of murderers skulking around waiting to kill her tenant. With her in the middle.

A pot-smoking kid with a boom box who was late with his rent might not have been so bad after all.

Rozinski, the detective, asked his age, received an enigmatic smile, and tried to guess. Not quite seventy, maybe, but impossible to tell. Old people were like young women. You could easily be five years off. Either way.

Thin but fit. Still moved like a gymnast. Impossible to be caught off balance. Wouldn't have liked to tangle with him when he was younger. He looked like the type who could hit you three times before you clenched a fist.

They arranged a lineup. Macklin picked the man out without hesitation. He couldn't help with the driver—hidden by the roof of the car as Macklin had walked by and then by the passenger as they'd driven off.

No question they had the right duo. Longtime friends with matching rap sheets. Rigo and Jacks. Macklin had given them the car description and plate number, and the triggerman, Rigo, had a wad of folded bills tucked into his pocket. Rigo was built like a basketball player—long

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arms and legs and spare body; Jacks like a weightlifter—no neck, enormous biceps, and chest like a bass drum.

Finding the gun would be a big help.

"Must have ditched it before we stopped them," Rozinski said. "We'll search the route."

As though hesitant to offer advice, Macklin said slowly, "At the time they pulled away, he would have seen no reason to dispose of it. It may be still in the car. He was bent over as they drove off, down there too long to be merely sliding the weapon under the seat or into the glove box. He could have been hiding it."

Rozinski called the police garage.

"How did you know what was going on?" he asked after he hung up.

"Phil didn't wave back. He always had before, no matter what he was doing. Then there was the car with the engine running and the door open. Didn't feel as though the man had run inside to pick up a tube of toothpaste."

Rozinski studied him. "You were once a cop."

Macklin merely smiled, which Rozinski thought strange. He'd never met a former policeman who was reluctant to talk about it.

Rozinski turned him over to an assistant district attorney named Andrea, a young woman with wild brown ringlets that didn't go at all with a square face and firm jaw and unwavering brown eyes, who said it was too bad he didn't witness the actual shooting.

Macklin pointed out that if he'd stood there gawking, they'd have had no witness at all, since he'd have been dead on the sidewalk. To his knowledge, guns came with more than one bullet.

Nevertheless, she thought they had enough to nail Rigo. Jacks was a different problem. Since he hadn't been identified at the scene, his defense attorney would argue he'd become the driver after the unidentified driver had disappeared, leaving him open only for possession of a stolen vehicle. If the judge bought the argument—and who knew how a judge's mind worked?—he just might be admonished not to be naughty again and released on his own recognizance.

And that, she said, might create a problem for Macklin. Jacks just might take it upon himself to persuade him not to testify against Rigo, leaving them with only circumstantial evidence, which juries were very quick to believe had been planted. Unfortunately, they couldn't do much to protect him other than to have a car drive by the house every so often. It would be far better if he could simply go away until he had to testify.

Macklin told her he never worried about anything until it was time to worry and in any case, he'd be going nowhere, and if she'd get his statement typed up so he could sign it and get out of there, he'd appreciate it. And incidentally, she should consider changing her hairstyle to something fuller and softer. Do wonders for her.

Before she could tell him her hair was none of his damned business, and he ought to get an electric shaver that worked before criticizing

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someone else, Rozinski interrupted to say they'd found the gun. Jammed up under the instrument panel. Score another point for Macklin.

Macklin left a half-hour later, leaving Andrea still steaming over the hair criticism and Rozinski wondering. The man had to have been a cop. He wondered so much, he took the coffee cup Macklin had been using and asked forensics to lift the prints so he could run them.

He ran into people like Rigo and Jacks every day. This Macklin, now, a man like that made life more interesting.

The television stations didn't consider the shooting death of a mere druggist during a holdup worth more than a thirty-second sound bite with the store as background. A witness was mentioned, but Macklin wasn't named.

For which Mrs. Baker was grateful, because if he had been, perhaps reporters and cameramen would have been trampling her front lawn. It was, however, big news for the local weekly, which sent a young man with long hair, wearing a baseball cap turned backward, a floppy T-shirt, ragged jeans, and dirty white sneakers, with a pad in one hand, a pen in the other, and a camera hanging from his neck.

Assiduously reinvigorating her flower beds with an evil-smelling top dressing whose primary ingredient originated in a horse barn—scooped from the two-wheeled garden cart her unimaginative son had given her as a Mother's Day gift—Mrs. Baker eyed him suspiciously.

When he asked for Macklin, she brandished her small spade menacingly and told him she had no idea of where he might be, and if she did know, she wouldn't tell him, and unless he departed forthwith, she'd turn her garden hose on him because he obviously could use a bath.

He withdrew to his car, muttering about crazy old ladies who were using up Social Security so that there would be none left when he retired.

So she was outside when the police cruiser dropped off Macklin, who was immediately accosted by the scraggly newsman.

She was too far away to hear what Macklin said, but she could swear the reporter turned pale before retreating, probably muttering about crazy old men using up Social Security so that there would be none left when he retired.

Her "What have you been up to?" expression and folded arms reminded Macklin of his mother and a couple of grade-school nuns, signaling he'd never make it past her without reporting.

When he'd finished, she said, "So you're the icing on the prosecutor's cake. If something happened to you—"

She'd never noticed his eyes before. Just dark, she thought. Now she saw they were warmer and lighter than she'd remembered. Instead of worried, they seemed amused.

"Those things make a good plot device for a TV movie, Mrs. Baker. In real life, they're not worth considering."

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"There is always an exception."

"That's what life is about, isn't it? To take care of these little problems as they come up? And it would be my problem, not yours, but there is really no point to worrying about it now."

"I hope not." She hesitated. "I'm not complaining. I can understand you had no choice."

"No." He sounded wistful. "Certain responsibilities can't be avoided."

Oh, well, she told the card players later, if she'd rented to a pot-smoking kid with a boom box, she'd still have a problem.

Well, yes, said Mary Ann, but mindless noise isn't quite the same as a man lurking behind the azalea with a knife, dear. Are we going to play cards or what?

The justice system clicked merrily along. The problem was never in arresting a lawbreaker. The problem always lay in sending him away so that he could do no further harm. In view of the evidence—Macklin, the automatic with Rigo's fingerprints, and ballistics proof it had been used to kill Phil—the judge considered it reasonable to allow a jury of Rigo's peers to decide if he was guilty or the victim of police harassment.

But, as Andrea had predicted, Jacks's attorney glibly pointed out that no one could identify Jacks as the driver even though his were the only prints on the wheel—a driver engaged in an illegal act might well have been smart enough to wear gloves, right?—so at the moment, Jacks was guilty only of driving a stolen vehicle, which was really not such a heinous crime—even if he'd known it was stolen, which he certainly did not. Mr. Jacks was therefore entitled to bail and a separate trial, and the DA's office to the fervent hope he might actually appear for it.

Andrea tossed her ringlets and asked Rozinski, "Did you see those two whispering?"

Indeed he had. Only a couple of sentences before they were separated, but there was no doubt of the subject of the discussion. If looks could kill, Macklin would have been a dead man. Ten to one Rigo was giving Jacks instructions. "Muscle-head Jacks will do anything Rigo tells him," said Andrea. "You'll have to do something to protect that hairy old Vidal Sassoon or he'll be criticizing the hairstyles of angels while we're left with just the gun."

Offhand, Rozinski could think of nothing much he could do to protect Macklin. Now, if he'd been a witness in an important mob case or something like that, he could stash him in a hotel room with round-the-clock protection, but in a drugstore holdup and murder? Why the hell hadn't Phil installed a videocam monitor? A storeowner today not only needed electronic surveillance but a couple of starving Rottweilers and a seven-foot, three-hundred-pound, Uzi-toting former Green Beret as a guard.

When he returned to the office, two men were waiting. In the lieu-

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tenant's office. Suits, shoes, shirts, ties, socks better than he could afford. Feds.

The lieutenant's face was blank. "They want to talk to you, Rozinski. Something about fingerprints. Your witness on the drugstore killing."

One of the Oscar De la Renta twins asked, "If he's only a witness, why did you run his prints?"

"Curiosity. Did I violate a federal statute?"

"What do you mean, curiosity?"

"He comes across as a former cop, but he doesn't talk about it. And not just a former cop, but a good one. I wondered who he was and where he'd worked."

"That's all?" Since they didn't introduce themselves and the lieutenant didn't bother, Rozinski named them Bill and Al after another pair of well-known federal employees.

"Why should there be more?"

Bill looked at Al. "What do you think?"

Al shrugged and rose to his feet. "He's just a witness. Let's forget about it."

"You two can. I can't," said Rozinski. "He may be in trouble."

They sat down again. "Explain."

Rozinski explained.

"This Jacks," said Bill. "What are you dealing with?"

"Small-time. All muscle but no brains. Getting rid of an old man won't bother him at all."

Bill appeared thoughtful. "Macklin isn't your usual type of old man."

"I already knew that," said Rozinski. "Why do you think I ran his prints? Since you seem to know all about him, maybe you can give us a suggestion. Without giving away any national-security secrets, of course. The lieutenant and I, well, you never know. We might have a direct fax line to global spy headquarters."

Bill looked at Al. "Why do we always run into the wiseasses?"

"Could be you ask for it," said the lieutenant. "Now either contribute something meaningful to the conversation or wave goodbye as you go through the door."

Bill thought for a moment. "All right. I'll tell you what I'd do in your position. Just tell, uh . . . Macklin about Jacks and go about your business."

"Even though we have a skinny old man going up against a side of beef with muscles in his fingernails?"

"The odds are that the side of beef will end up on the carving block."

The lieutenant allowed a few moments of silence. "If I read you right, you're saying that Macklin will take care of himself by taking care of Jacks."

Bill nodded. "Something like that."

"I can't condone any killing," said the lieutenant grimly.

"Killing?" Bill turned to Al. "Do you think he'd kill Jacks?"

Al shook his head. "Not his style."

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Bill grinned. "You got that right. Let's go." He turned back to Rozinski. "Forget about those fingerprints. You really don't want to know."

After they'd gone, Rozinski asked, "What do you think?"

The lieutenant stacked a sheaf of papers before him and picked up his pen. "I think you ought to do what they said. Sometimes they get it right."

Macklin had already been well aware of the problem, but good manners mandated that he give Rozinski his full attention. Which he did, thanking him with a warm handshake. Rozinski drove off, feeling that Macklin was well ahead of him, but protocol had been observed.

Macklin sat on the steps to the porch—Mrs. Baker off playing cards—and eliminated almost all the diverse methods someone of Jacks's background and intelligence might use to eliminate *him*.

Settling on one.

Jacks would look for where Macklin was most vulnerable, where he could use his muscle with the least risk to himself.

And that would put him right here, on a quiet, tree-lined suburban street, with plenty of shadows and assorted shrubs for concealment—in the early hours of the morning when all good citizens were asleep and the bad ones were out creating more work for public defenders.

Oh yes, thought Macklin. That was what Jacks would tell himself, never thinking that Macklin would reach the same conclusion. Or could do anything about it if he did.

It gave Macklin a two-pronged problem—he not only had to convince Jacks of the error of his ways, but he had to be sure that Mrs. Baker, sleeping the sleep of the innocent, wasn't harmed. Or even disturbed.

The bad side was, he'd thought he was all through with slinking around in the dark.

The good side was that it was like riding a bicycle. You might get a little rusty but you never forgot how.

The afternoon breeze brought an odor that made his nose crinkle. Mrs. Baker's infamous top dressing.

She'd parked her hosed-out garden cart to dry in the sun alongside the rose bushes. Not the usual homeowner's lightweight version. Big enough and strong enough for real heavy-duty use. Easily hold several hundred pounds. Always give Mom the best on Mother's Day.

He eyed it thoughtfully.

Jacks drove by the house several times, once during the day, the others after midnight. He could see no problem. He was sure there was no electronic alarm, so all he had to do was get inside, find the old man, and get rid of him. Old people were easy. He'd pick up a few things to make it look like a burglary. If the old lady got in the way, she'd have to go too, but he hoped she was a sound sleeper. Made people very angry when old ladies got killed in their homes, like old people were important or something.

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He returned on a moonless night that seemed darker than usual, parked, and walked boldly up to the house. Doors would be locked but there might be an unlatched window. If not, the tools in his pocket would take care of it.

He was testing one at the rear, wondering what he was standing in that could smell so bad, when he heard a slight hiss and felt a stinging sensation in his back. He retreated, twisted, trying to reach it, felt everything going hazy and his legs growing weak. Something rammed into the back of his knees, sitting him down hard and doubling him up.

Paralyzed, helpless, and fighting to breathe, he remained on the edge of consciousness, dimly aware of being wheeled along.

Then his arms were pulled forward, handcuffs clicked around his wrists, and he felt roughness against his cheek. He was dumped out of whatever he was in so that he landed on his knees and then he was pushed and pulled to the accompaniment of sounds like a knife slitting cloth, the cool night air washing over his skin.

A soft voice whispered in his ear, sounding far away but clear and cold enough to make ice form in the pit of his stomach, and then the voice was gone.

He felt as if he were swimming up from a great depth until he broke the surface and could breathe, the way it had been the time he'd gotten hold of some bad stuff. He had a headache an entire bottle of aspirin wouldn't even dent. He looked down at himself and then at what he was cuffed to, and had no idea of what it was or what he was doing there. He considered yelling, but the voice had told him not to or he would die, and he believed the voice. Just stand there, it had said. Someone will come along. And think how safe you'd be in prison because that's the only place where I can't get to you.

Safe. Vague images of unspeakable horror quivered in his mind—the cold voice had found a fissure in his inner being and cracked it open to release the inherited fears no one ever outgrew—of darkness, and unknown and merciless shadows that stalked the night. Much worse than the simple thought of death.

Slowly the thought grew that he was dealing with someone crazy, what was done to him. Serial killer stuff. Wasn't enough just to snuff you. Had to make you helpless so you still knew what was going on while you were sliced into little pieces like pastrami. Why would a crazy pick on him?

All those sweating hours he'd spent building those muscles meant nothing. He trembled.

When dawn began to lighten the sky, a few windows came alive with light. A small dog trotted up, sniffed, and urinated on his leg. He scarcely noticed.

Muted sounds alien to a peaceful morning woke Mrs. Baker. She rose and parted the bedroom curtain. Through the trees, the early light of

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dawn showed the rear end of a police car, one of the officers helping a man wrapped in a blanket into the backseat before the car moved off.

She slipped into her robe—very nice one, silk with a touch of lace, no ratty chenille for her—and went to the kitchen and made coffee, carrying her cup to the front porch. The street was deserted, too early for that brief period of activity when her young neighbors left for work.

She noticed long streaks in the dew-wet lawn leading to the rear, walked through the house and out the kitchen door. Her garden cart was where she'd left it near the rose bushes. Never liked that thing. Too heavy. She wished she could get rid of it without hurting her son's feelings.

The streaks in the grass started near her kitchen window, went around the side, and returned to the cart. Someone had used it during the night.

The top dressing under the window didn't look right, either; not her carefully smoothed mound at all, but as though someone had hastily raked it over.

Disregarding the wet grass soaking her slippers, she walked around to the front, arriving just as Mr. Donahue from across the street emerged on his way to work. He saw her, hesitated, and crossed.

"I don't suppose you know what happened," he said.

"No," she said.

"The police found a naked man handcuffed to the telephone pole in front of your house."

"Naked?"

"Naked. His clothes had been cut off."

She sipped her coffee, regarding him over the rim of the cup. "Frankly, Mr. Donahue, my heart no longer skips a beat at the strange behavior of people. I've heard that a few have taken to hugging trees but wasn't aware their environmental affection ran to embracing splintery telephone poles. I do hope the poor man didn't acquire a sliver in a vital part of his male anatomy."

Chuckling, Donahue lifted a hand and drove off to earn his daily bread. The naked man and Mrs. Baker's comments guaranteed that he'd be the center of attention all morning.

She turned to find Macklin standing on the porch. He was dressed in black shirt, slacks, and trainers. A bit menacing, she thought. She felt a thrill.

"The police found a naked man handcuffed to the telephone pole," she said, knowing she looked very nice in the robe.

"Oh?"

"And someone used my garden cart last night. It left tracks in the grass."

"They'll be gone once the dew evaporates in the sun."

"I think the man tried to break into my kitchen window."

"I wouldn't be a bit surprised. There *have* been burglaries in the area."

She studied him for a moment. "Would you like some coffee?"

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"That would be nice, Mrs. Baker."

"Call me Birdie," she said.

Both seated on the steps, Rozinski looked at Macklin. "He wants to go to jail. For stealing the car. He says he'll be safe there."

"Safe from what?"

"He won't say. To tell you the truth, the man's gone a bit weird. Okay, we don't get him as an accomplice in the killing, but we'll settle for Rigo. With the gun, ballistics, and you as witness, we have him cold."

Macklin smiled slightly. "So justice triumphs."

"Listen." Rozinski cleared his throat. "Jacks was still wearing his shoes. One sniff told us he'd been wading in Mrs. Baker's top dressing, but I don't think *she* handcuffed him to that pole. Not that we give a damn who did. I have only one question. Even with a gun to his head, I can't see a big guy like Jacks marching to that pole peacefully and being handcuffed there, much less allowing his clothes to be cut off. He'd rather be shot. So. What took the fight out of him? Any ideas?"

"I'm hardly qualified to speculate—"

"Did I mention this conversation has all the sanctity of the confessional? Just think of me as Father Rozinski."

Macklin stroked his beard thoughtfully. "In that case, Father, perhaps I can make a wild guess."

"Guess away, my son."

"I'm sure you've seen TV documentaries where an animal control officer uses a tranquilizer dart when it is necessary to tag or transport a wild animal. Something similar may have happened to Jacks. I recall reading about a drug called a disassociative anesthetic. The name is self-explanatory, really. It leaves a person partly conscious and completely helpless, much like one of those animals. Bad side effects, however. Horrible nightmares, that sort of thing. Could explain why he thinks he'll be safe in prison. Highly illegal for a layman to use, though."

"Well, I'll be damned. I read a novel where terrorists used something like that to kidnap a very important scientist, but I considered it the product of the writer's imagination."

"Ah," said Macklin. "Maybe that was where I read it."

Rozinski grinned. "Entirely possible. But I don't remember anything about cutting his clothes off."

Macklin shrugged. "Obviously, whoever assaulted Mr. Jacks utilized an ancient technique used throughout the world to humiliate an opponent and demonstrate dominance. Nothing convinces a captive more that he is at the mercy of the captor than to be placed naked on public view to the jeers of the populace. We all feel very vulnerable when naked."

"I can testify to that. I was once caught—" He cleared his throat. "I have only one more question. If the drug made him helpless, how did he get to that pole? We're talking of maybe two hundred and fifty pounds of dead weight to move."

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Macklin waved at Mrs. Baker's smooth, sun-drenched lawn and the closed doors of her toolshed, where her cart was now tucked away with other garden implements. "I can't imagine. Nothing here that could be used to move him."

Rozinski stared up at the blue sky for a moment. "Oh, well, we probably have it all wrong. It isn't likely anyone around here would know about a drug like that and where to get it. The average citizen is familiar only with the over-the-counter remedies they see in TV commercials."

He rose, thinking that with this guy's unique way of solving problems, he'd better keep in touch. He dusted the seat of his slacks. "As I said, this conversation is safe with me, but you know, the word confessional goes hand in hand with penance for transgressions." He held up three fingers in benediction and grinned. "Bless you, my son. As Father Rozinski, I do believe a few extra dollars for the church this week would not be amiss. As Detective Rozinski, I look forward to seeing you at the trial."

The trial never took place. Rigo's attorney rose to his feet and said his client wished to change his plea from innocent to guilty.

The person next to Mrs. Baker whispered, "Made a deal."

Of course they did, thought Mrs. Baker. Mr. Macklin looked positively handsome in a dark, well-cut suit. Real commanding presence. If a man like that took the stand and identified Rigo as the man in the drugstore, the jury couldn't help but leap to its feet and yell, "Guilty!" Especially the women.

ADA Andrea looked really nice, too, in her stylish but conservative courtroom suit, and very pretty, with her hair full and flowing. Naturally wavy, too.

But the way she smiled up at Mr. Macklin—well, really. Looked ready to jump his bones right there in the courtroom. Good heavens, you'd think these young women would draw the line somewhere. The man was too old for her. She ought to be ashamed of herself.

Rozinski begging off because of his work load, Macklin took Andrea and Mrs. Baker to lunch at a much touted French restaurant to celebrate a minor triumph over crime.

Signing the check an hour and a half later, he acknowledged to himself that somehow he'd committed a major blunder.

With tone of voice, occasional glances, and wintry smiles, the two women had waged a duel; imaginary swords flashing and clanging above the best efforts of an internationally known chef—his award-winning delicacies receiving no more attention than thick platters of tasteless highway-restaurant food.

Macklin had no idea of what *that* had been about. Or if either had won.

He was simply thankful no one had been killed.●

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Art by Allen Davis

LEAP OF FAITH

by Mary Reed and Eric Mayer

The holy man took flight from the top of the fifty-cubit-tall marble column he had not left in twenty-five years. For an instant—the time it might take for a shivering droplet to come loose from the spout of a water clock—the crowd gathered in Forum Anastasius supposed it was witnessing a miracle. But even as pilgrims and acolytes fell to their knees, they realized the truth. Leo the stylite was not soaring. He had leapt, or been pushed, or for some reason had fallen, and though he might momentarily ascend to heaven, he would not do so bodily.

An instant before Leo the Castigator began his fatal descent, John the Eunuch, Lord Chamberlain to the Emperor Justinian, had shielded his eyes with a thin brown hand and squinted up into a sun that trembled like molten sand on the end of a glass blower's pipe. Against that glorious light—which was John's own deity, for he was a Mithran—the Christian holy man appeared little more than an ill-defined shadow. Moments later, John was pondering how Leo had been killed atop a smooth-sided column without access by stairs and with no ladder in place, not to mention being in full view of a crowd of worshipers and a company of palace guards. He wished he had not been forced to

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blink by the intense sunlight, because the beginning of Leo's flight might have given him some clue to the mystery. But perhaps, John reflected, that was Mithra's way of testing him.

The stylite renowned as Leo the Castigator had ascended a marble column in the center of Forum Anastasius before the reign of Justinian and, until today, had never come down. Naked except for a cross of heavy chain, he stood day and night, exposed to the elements, while his beard and his fame grew and the iron railing around the top of the column rusted. During the worst months of winter, on those miraculous days when the sun made an appearance over Constantinople's seven hills, light blazed off the sheen of ice on the ancient stylite's skin, and the pilgrims gathered below prayed even more fervently, because then Leo resembled a gilt-encrusted icon.

Now it was summer and the stylite was being honored for his feat of renunciation, which some non-Christians might have considered sheer obstinance. One such, John's young friend Anatolius, standing among a knot of officials and workers at the base of the column, helped himself to a juicy pomegranate from a basket waiting to be hauled up to the stylite's circumscribed quarters.

"Tempus fugit," he sighed, sarcastically, long since tired of the ceremony which seemed to be dragging on to match Leo's residence atop the column. Abandoning official Latin for the Greek most in the empire now used, he continued: "I've often wondered whether stylites or their columns came first? When I was a boy, my Uncle Zeno told me that the emperors used to erect columns to attract holy men, just as bird lovers hang up nesting boxes in their gardens. In fact, he said that when informed that Thessalonica boasted more stylites than the capital, Anastasius decreed that columns be raised on every hill in the city. And," he rattled on, "they're always occupied. There were, my uncle claimed, lists kept of those who had asked for the honor of taking a place nearer to heaven atop a column. Of course, he also insisted the world was shaped like the Ark of the Covenant."

"A man of eclectic credulity," noted John, who often wished the emperor's secretary would be more circumspect in public about his pagan beliefs.

"Mind you," Anatolius went on, "it's good for business. The pilgrims

Mary Reed and Eric Mayer's story "Leap of Faith" is the fourth in a series of short stories they began for *The Mammoth Book of Historical Whodunits,* edited by Mike Ashley and published by Carroll & Graf. The series enjoyed success in two subsequent anthologies of historical mysteries before finding its way into *EQMM,* where we believe readers will enjoy the authors' unusual choice of historical setting. ✝

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keep the inns filled, not to mention the taverns and brothels, although they wouldn't admit to patronizing the latter."

John consulted a scrap of parchment. "Indeed? Oddly enough, that basket you've just lightened is an offering from Madam Isis, who, according to her presentation letter, sincerely wishes all her girls will be reformed, though not, I would imagine, tomorrow or the next day. The gift being hauled up the column right now is, I see, dried figs from the new keeper of the Inn of the Centaurs."

Anatolius raised his gaze towards the basket ascending slowly as Leo pulled it up by the stout rope which was his only means of contact with the earth-bound.

"If he'd grease that squeaking pulley perhaps the gift-giving would go faster." Anatolius spat pomegranate seeds onto the dusty cobbles. "It's fine for these girls to reform, but what will they all do for a living?"

It wasn't a question for which John had an answer. He gestured a nearby guard forward, pointing to a sack of wheat. "This goes up next."

"Help yourself to some of the fruit. It's thirsty work," Anatolius invited the guard. "I understand charity is important to these holy fellows," he added, unabashed, in response to John's frown of disapproval.

Although more stoic than Anatolius, John was growing just as impatient. The ceremonies he presided over were generally more dignified—church openings, feast days, imperial processions—but Justinian, who doted on his empress, had assigned John to carry out Theodora's tribute to Leo.

Given rumors about her sordid past, it wasn't surprising Theodora made a show of reforming prostitutes and honoring holy men, nor was it surprising that for this occasion she had insisted on a didactic play about a holy fool and a prostitute. But since the diminutive woman who played the prostitute was reputedly a former prostitute herself and the holy fool was played by Theodora's favorite mime, Barnabas, who specialized in playing lascivious and acrobatic old coots, the effect, in John's admittedly pagan opinion, was somewhat unfortunate.

Anatolius seemed not to agree. "I'd say that woman dancing with Barnabas could make a living in the theater." John refrained from observing that that would amount to more or less the same type of work she'd always done. "Do you know her name, by any chance?"

"Maria, I believe. Used to be at Madam Isis's house, I understand."

The pair's cautionary capers were eliciting laughter both from the dignitaries under the purple-canopied temporary pavilion which had been erected for their comfort and the pilgrims confined to an area beside it, beneath the portico on the eastern side of the forum.

To Felix, the Captain of the Excubitors, Justinian's palace guard, the pilgrims were not an economic boon but a potential mob waiting for a riot to happen. He growled as he stamped past, scanning the forum suspiciously. "There'll be a coup at the palace before this is over, if you ask me. The empress would do better tossing these pole sitters over the walls. They attract too many footloose outsiders. Public nuisances, the

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lot of them. And what about the one that came down off his pillar to lead a riot?" he ended darkly.

"Relax and watch the spectacle," suggested the incorrigible Anatolius. "I don't expect old Leo is quite up to coming down any time soon, so why fret about it? Did you see how Barnabas picked the woman up in one hand?"

"Woman? She doesn't weigh as much as my mace. A child, surely?" Felix snorted.

"Hardly. Don't you have eyes?" Anatolius was unabashed. "Well, here is Gaius. You'll take the opinion of a physician, won't you, Felix? Gaius! Come over here! That's a grown woman out there dancing with the mime, isn't it? Despite her stature?"

Gaius the physician was a stout man. Sweat gleamed on his pale bald head and on his nose, which was swollen and purple from having been in close proximity to a wine glass too often. "I once treated Anastasius's favorite dwarf. A man, and he was shorter than that woman. Then, too, I've seen Barnabas perform, and he's capable of lifting a greater weight than you might think. Just like that old fraud up on the column."

"Fine words from a good Christian." Felix smiled grimly.

"Perhaps he gets his strength from these." Gaius held out a clay coin stamped with a crude image of a man atop a column. "Pilgrim token. Acolytes sell them all over Constantinople. Made out of clay that's been blessed. Supposed to have healing properties when crumbled and applied to the flesh." Gaius ground the token between thumb and finger and watched the dust sift down to the cobbles. "Never helped anyone's health except Leo's. Hauling those buckets of clay up and down is better exercise than you get at the gymnasium, I'll wager."

John was half paying attention to his friends' conversation while monitoring the progress of the ceremonies. The performance by Barnabas and Maria had just ended, a little earlier than anticipated, for a few sacks and baskets still needed to be hauled up before the concluding orations. He wondered where Leo was going to have room to stand; the offerings atop the column must be piled knee-high.

He checked his list. There were baskets and sacks of pious offerings. Fruit and flowers, oil and wine, fish, fowl, grain. There were even copper, silver, and gold goods, a cornucopia of tributes from the empress and from various orders of repentant working girls, from the Green faction and the Blue faction, from innkeepers and madams, not to mention assorted other stylites, dendrites, holy fools, and the like. There were even gifts from perfumers and glass blowers and dyers, whose products were obviously of no interest to Leo, but whose generosity in giving would no doubt garner imperial approval for the givers. The list seemed as endless as the demands of an angry mob. Glancing around, John noticed that a young man dressed in a white robe had approached and was now standing beside Gaius. The man tilted his head back, gazing up towards heaven or Leo. Without looking at Gaius, he addressed him in a strained voice.

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"I must dispute what you say, physician. My name is Matthew and I am an acolyte of that most holy man, Leo. Hundreds of pilgrims can attest to the efficacy of these healing tokens."

"They can attest they're cheaper than the professional treatment they should be seeking. Though not by much."

"The clay of Leo's tokens has been blessed by its very proximity to his holy feet."

Gaius was about to remark that, given conditions atop the column, proximity to Leo was not something everyone would count as a blessing, when the acolyte's sensibilities were spared by the arrival of a tall, haggard man, resplendent in embroidered court garments. The man appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, and grasped the acolyte's arm.

"Liar! I'll have your tongue cut out!"

The acolyte stared at his attacker in confusion.

"Your holy fraud murdered my wife," shouted the stranger. "Poor believer, she insisted your miserable tokens would heal her. She fell under a cart and mangled her shoulder. Refused to see a physician. Even an old drunk like Gaius here might have saved her. Your miserable tokens didn't!"

He pushed the acolyte roughly against the column and strode away. Felix and two guards approached at a run, as the last of the offerings was pulled up. John noted Felix spoke briefly with the stranger and then allowed him to go on his way, apparently satisfied that the man either meant no harm, or was too high in the court hierarchy to be questioned, at least publicly. By then, Leo had begun his sermon.

Although most in the crowd had heard it before, the dignitaries sat, and the pilgrims stood, in apparently rapt attention, as if they all thought Leo's Lord might be looking down into the searingly hot forum, making sure that no one was asleep. John, who occasionally heard parts of Leo's daily diatribes while passing across the forum, did his best not to listen. It was no jest that Leo was known as "The Castigator." In a gratingly high-pitched voice, he began denouncing every person and thing that walked or, mostly, it seemed in his opinion, crawled upon the earth he'd abandoned twenty-five years before.

"What is this blasphemy? You honor me with laughter? Heed what Saint Jerome said, that laughter will be punished on Judgment Day. . . . And which of you, painted empress or prancing acrobat, can say that your own Judgment Day will not arrive before the sun goes down . . . ? Like maggots writhing in darkness, debating the merits of an emperor your forebears have long since devoured. Worshipers of the Jeweled Toads! . . . Vermin . . ."

John found his gaze drawn back to the azure sky. The sun's blinding light pulsated against his face. He would have to stop at the baths before returning home.

It was then that he blinked, missing Leo's sudden departure from the column. A sack of fish preceded the stylite, hitting the cobbles with the same kind of thud Leo made an eye-blink later.

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Matthew, the acolyte, reached the holy man first, but he was backing away in horror as the rest approached. All noted red staining the young man's trembling hands.

"He's dead!" His voice quavered.

Christians, John had long since noticed, tended to speak blithely of death, but when they met it face-to-face, it was another matter. "Gaius," he instructed, "come quickly!"

The Empress Theodora, accompanied by several bodyguards, emerged from the pavilion and strode over to the body, planting her red shoes a hand's breadth from the remains. She glared at John.

"This is a great embarrassment to me, John, and you were in charge." Her tone was low and venomous. Raising her voice, she addressed the onlookers. "As empress, I promise that Leo's murderer shall take his place and die atop that column. And, Lord Chamberlain," she turned to address John more publicly, "if you haven't produced the guilty party by sunset, you'll take his place up there instead."

"But Leo just fell over the low railing," protested Anatolius. "Surely it was an accident? How can the Lord Chamberlain produce a murderer who doesn't exist?"

"Nonsense! Leo managed not to fall for twenty-five years. And he would hardly have had the temerity to decide to jump to his death right before my eyes!"

"The empress is correct," John confirmed, drawing the imperial wrath away from Anatolius. "It wasn't an accident."

"Well, he doesn't appear to have been poisoned," Gaius looked up from examining the departed stylite. "Or at least not by any poison I've ever seen. Lips aren't blue, there's no pallor."

The empress, having draped the train of her highly decorated dalmatic over one arm to prevent it from dragging over the dirty cobblestones, circled the body, her bright but sunken eyes accentuating her likeness to a large bejeweled vulture. She bent forward, peering more closely at the body. Her nostrils flared. "There is blood on his ankles," she observed.

It was difficult to be certain. The stylite's legs exhibited a mass of sores, the worst of which were, mercifully, partially concealed by a second skin composed of wisps of straw, grain husks, and worse.

"He must have raked his ankles on the railing when he fell," offered a flustered Gaius. "His skin is in such dreadful condition that it would have split as easily as the peel on a rotten apple."

A moan escaped from the acolyte, hitherto standing by silently.

The empress straightened. Her thin, painted lips curved into a smile. "Of the two possibilities which I am currently contemplating, Lord Chamberlain, I do not know which I would find most pleasing. On reflection, however, the pleasure of seeing this holy man's murderer brought to justice would be transitory compared to the pleasure of watching you die slowly and painfully up there on that column."

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Theodora motioned to her bodyguards that she was ready to return to the pavilion. John thought they looked more relieved than the imperial consort to escape the sight, not to mention the stench, of sudden, violent death.

"Don't worry about her threats, John," Anatolius offered. "Justinian wouldn't stand for it. He knows the empress hates you. You would have been languishing in chains long since if he went along with her every whim."

"No doubt." John had learned, long before, that nothing could be taken for granted at the Byzantine court.

"She seems to be convinced that you try to influence Justinian," Anatolius went on, nervously. "If you could just set her mind to rest—"

"Perhaps that's part of it, my friend. But not all. I can never be a man of the sort she is used to manipulating with her wiles. I fear we'll be enemies until the end. This afternoon, however, we have a more pressing problem. First, I need a ladder."

John had once remarked that no matter how high the stylites of the city raised their columns, they were only marginally nearer their heaven than the sinners on the streets. "It's like standing on a footstool under the dome of the Hagia Sophia," was how he had put it. Now, forty cubits up the rickety ladder occasionally used by Leo's followers, John revised his opinion. The dignitaries in their pavilion, the crowd now confined under the portico by Felix's excubitors, and the smaller group detained near the base of the column seemed to have receded to a great distance and John could appreciate how liberated from the world Leo must have felt at his even greater height.

The column, John noted, was not only solid marble—unlike some, it did not feature either an inner or outer stairway, or any attached ladder—but it was also smooth, except for a few weather-induced pits and cracks. There was nothing that John could hope to hang on to if the shaky ladder he was mounting were to suddenly give way. About forty-five cubits up the marble gave way to a crudely fashioned brick capital which, John had heard, had been added some years before to ensure that Leo, of all the inhabitants of the city, remained nearest to heaven. John examined the brickwork, wondering how the stylite had succeeded in having the column extended without falling off. However he had managed it, he had not done badly; the extension was essentially solid, apart from a few crevices of scarcely a hand's width between the bricks. No one could have hidden within.

Reaching the platform, John slid carefully under the railing, almost dislodging a sack hanging on it, while trying to avoid stepping on scattered pieces of glass and slivers of broken pottery. He was less fortunate in avoiding worse. Now he would have to burn his boots when he got home—presuming he got home. For whatever purpose Leo's acolytes had occasionally climbed up to visit the stylite, it was obviously not to clean. Although much of the available area was now filled with

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sacks, baskets, and earthenware, they were scattered on an accumulation of filth.

Suppressing a gag, John surveyed the platform from which Leo had recently uprooted himself. Some of the gifts had already fallen from their containers. Fruit was strewn everywhere. Crushed grain and bird and rodent droppings lay in a puddle of oil. Much of the older debris on the platform was white with maggots; a crater in the disgusting mound testified where the stylite's feet had been planted. Since John could stretch one arm across the space in which Leo had spent so long, his search was mercifully brief. His glance lit upon a basket full of clay, no doubt intended to be blessed by Leo before being fashioned into the pilgrim tokens Gaius had mentioned. He grasped the handle experimentally, finding it even heavier than he'd imagined. Two other items caught, and kept, his attention. One was a dagger, its blade bearing traces of red. The other was a rolled parchment addressed to Leo. It bore, John saw when he picked it up gingerly from the debris, a florid Latin curse wishing the stylite a slow and agonizing death.

Before descending, John looked around one last time. From the hilltop column, he could see as far as the glinting waters of the Bosphorus in one direction and, in the other, out to the city walls. Most of the flat house roofs jumbled between the two displayed crosses. He could even see the stylite who occupied the next column, nearly as high as Leo's, on the next hill. He wondered if the other holy man could see him, and, if so, whether he might be jealous of what he would take to be the stylite's seemingly newly acquired sumptuous purple robes. Then, recalling Theodora's threats, John stepped out quickly onto the ladder.

"The rest of you might have been looking elsewhere, but I never took my eyes from him, and I'm certain that he touched none of the food or drink sent up before he began his sermon." Matthew was whiter than his robes.

Someone had given up a threadbare cloak to cover Leo's crumpled body. Not for the departed stylite the rich robes of earthly glory.

John did not doubt Matthew had done as he said. Beyond that, he was not so sure of Matthew's veracity. No one else seemed to have seen Leo eat or drink anything, but as yet no one else had claimed to have been watching him so closely. "And what exactly did you see just before he fell?" he asked the young man.

"He was speaking, and then, his voice seemed to rise . . . well, his voice rises, or rose, a lot when he preached. I think . . . I'm not sure . . . he might have cried out, in a different way, as it were."

John agreed it might be difficult to differentiate between cries of pain and Leo's normal orating style. "And then?"

Matthew paused, straining to recall his impressions. "Then he fell. He didn't crumple, as if stabbed, or as if he had lost consciousness, or fainted with the sun. He seemed to take a quick step forward. Then he

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went over the railing. I'm not surprised. You've seen for yourself how low it is."

"He didn't climb over it?"

"How could he? His legs were . . . Well, unless the power of God was in him just then. If that were the case—"

"I don't think we need concern ourselves with that right now."

The acolyte's observations were in accord with the more fragmentary recollections John gleaned from other witnesses as he moved from group to group around the forum.

Anatolius, waiting by the column for his return, had an interesting observation. "If someone had tampered with something, John, isn't it improbable Leo would have picked up the poisoned item immediately?"

"True, but our lives are generally a succession of improbabilities, everything considered. Besides, Leo was up there for years. I'm sure his enemy would have been content to wait a few more days before sending poisoned food up to him, rather than killing him in full view of the empress and half the court."

The sun had dropped far enough from its zenith to cast a patch of shadow on the rope hanging down the eastern side of the column. "If Leo had had that dagger you found used on him," Anatolius suggested helpfully, "that would explain the odd cry and the apparent lurch forward."

"It's possible. As you can see, it's the sort of dagger an excubitor would carry. Standard palace issue."

"You don't suspect one of the guards? It's impossible!"

"Felix claimed stylites attract troublemakers as well as pilgrims, remember? He knows the emperor would rather face the Persian army than another riot."

"John, I realize Felix is your friend. I'll have a word—"

"No. I intend to speak first with the guard who was assisting me with the offerings."

The man was found lounging against the back of the column. He pushed himself away hastily at John's approach.

"Lord Chamberlain. I'm at your service."

"Actually, I'm at yours," John half smiled. "I believe you have misplaced your dagger?"

The guard stared at the dagger in John's hand. "That's not mine. Mine's right—" His hand closed on an empty scabbard.

"If you lose your dagger at the palace you're liable to find it in your back," John pointed out mildly. "I've wiped off the blade. There was something red on it. Pomegranate juice, I should imagine.

"You did suggest he take some fruit," John reminded Anatolius as they turned away from the shaken guard. "He must have been slicing a pomegranate and left his weapon in the basket."

"I was afraid you might be considering Felix as a suspect. . . ."

"I consider everyone, Anatolius. Many destinations can be reached

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only with a leap. But to reach the appropriate precipice from which to leap requires small, careful steps."

"And the next?"

"There is also the curse in Latin."

"Which is the language of the court."

"Very good, my friend. Very good."

In the stifling shade of the pavilion the tall, gaunt-faced man glanced at the scroll John showed him. "Yes. I sent it up to the accursed old fraud. Slipped it into a basket of figs. And if my wishes had wings to fly up to that devil and hands to throw him to the ground they would have done so long since. Unfortunately, I am only a man, albeit a senator."

"You must be new to the office . . ."

"Epirus."

"As I was saying, Epirus, you must be newly elevated? Surely you would not want Theodora to hear such sentiments?"

"I'm not married to Theodora, Lord Chamberlain. The woman I was married to is dead—duped by the money-making frauds of—"

"I understand. Still, you cannot hope to rectify a wrong unless you keep your head, literally."

The pavilion was not large, but it was crowded. Several paces away, Theodora was engaged in loud conversation with the mime Barnabas, and seemed not to hear the whispered exchange between the senator and the Lord Chamberlain. This, John knew, did not mean that she had not heard and possibly memorized every word.

"What did you think to accomplish by sending this?" Epirus glared down at his interrogator. It made John uncomfortable, being looked down on. Not many were tall enough. "Perhaps a greater power answered your wish?"

"I spoke too rashly before," the senator said, "when I said I wished him thrown to the ground. It was an easier death than he deserved."

John pointed out Gaius, asking Epirus if he knew the physician.

"He treated my wife once. She didn't like him. She consulted him on a bad day."

"He was intoxicated, you mean."

Epirus nodded. "Gaius is a weak man. But Galen is no longer with us, and men like Gaius have inherited his knowledge. Better than that fraud's magic mud."

Theodora, accompanied by Barnabas, appeared at John's side. "Have you found our holy friend's murderer yet, Lord Chamberlain?"

"I fear not, Highness. These investigations take time."

"How unfortunate you are that you don't have any." The empress looked pointedly out into the forum, where the shadow of the column was a lengthening accusing finger.

"But at least I have the pleasure of meeting your talented friend Barnabas." John took the short, stocky man's hand; its skin was callused and the mime had a grip as strong as a blacksmith's.

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As if summoned by name-casting magic, Gaius drifted to the pavilion. John was looking thoughtfully after Theodora and her small companion, who were moving toward its opposite end, where several former prostitutes were discussing their new perspective on life with appreciative courtiers.

Gaius spoke directly to Epirus. "Anatolius told me about your wife. You have my condolences. I've treated infected lacerations successfully. I'm sure I could have saved her, if she had come to me."

"Of course," put in Anatolius, seeing the distress in Epirus's face, "it must have been Fate had decreed the outcome long since."

"Well, Fate is just another competitor of mine," sniffed Gaius.

Anatolius thought the Lord Chamberlain looked unusually preoccupied. But surely he had ascertained the identity of the murderer by now? Time was growing short. He began turning over in his mind all the statements John had made to him, and the questions he had been asking.

"Gaius," said John, "you told me Leo didn't appear to be poisoned. But could he have been poisoned without it appearing so?"

"As far as signs of poisoning go, I can't recognize them all, I'm sure. I don't even know if all of them leave symptoms, despite my years in this court. He might well have been poisoned, except that by all accounts, he didn't eat or drink anything recently."

The ever-helpful Anatolius pointed out the obvious possibility that the stylite had eaten before anyone arrived at the forum that morning. "And also, is it not possible to be poisoned merely by touching a substance?" he concluded.

Gaius frowned. "Perhaps."

John looked quickly at Epirus. "I don't wish to accuse you. You'll want your note back, I'm sure." John thrust the parchment roll towards the senator, holding it between thumb and forefinger.

Epirus refused to take it. "Do you think I poisoned that note?" His voice was dangerously loud, considering the many ears of high officials milling about at close quarters. "I don't know anything about poisons."

"But you and Gaius are acquainted and Gaius knows something of poisons," John pointed out.

The color left Gaius's face, except for the purple in his nose. "John, surely you don't suspect me?"

"But you can't deny you have a grievance against the stylites, since you think their tokens deprive you of business. Do you perhaps have another theory?"

"I've seen more than my share of murders. And they're never very interesting. Nothing to theorize over. Ordinary people are involved. They're not endlessly thinking about things, like you, John. They get enraged. So they strike out, or push, or stab."

The senator pointed out that the stylite, by definition, was alone on his column.

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"Someone who was able to climb up to him, who could pull himself up the rope, let's say?" Anatolius suggested.

"We were right at the foot of the rope," John pointed out.

Anatolius was insistent. "Well, couldn't someone have climbed up the back of the column? You can't really see that side from where we were. It would be difficult, I agree, especially given that it's fairly smooth, but surely a desperate man . . . ?"

"Well, there are cracks," John confirmed. "It is just possible that a person of exceptional strength—let us say Barnabas, for example—could climb up, theoretically, at least. But then what about our careless young guard, who was round the back? It would have been difficult to get past him."

Their conversation was shattered by a crowish laugh, announcing the return of the empress. "What a clever idea," she congratulated. "Unfortunately for your theory, Barnabas has been with me from the moment his performance ended." Her statement, whether true or not, was, they all realized, an unbreakable protection for the performer.

"The sun will fall behind the Hippodrome in a moment or two, which is close enough to sunset for me," continued the empress. "What do you have to tell me, Lord Chamberlain?"

"Tell her, John," urged Anatolius. "The murderer's obviously not going to request an audience."

The empress turned her piercing gaze towards John's friend. "Who won't request an audience? What is this about?"

"It was that woman—Maria," Anatolius blurted. "John . . . told me . . . She hid in one of the sacks. Leo was used to hauling up baskets of wet clay. She wasn't any heavier. She leapt out and pushed him over."

The empress laughed again. Her amusement, this time, was not crowlike, but only too human. It was, Anatolius thought, the kind of laugh for which payment might very well be exacted on Judgment Day, just as Saint Jerome had predicted.

"It may seem amusing, Highness," John said quietly, "but Anatolius is nearly correct." Theodora's laugh was loud enough to echo around the forum, but John's soft words cut through the harsh sound.

"Go on, Lord Chamberlain. I am fascinated. But remember the ladder still leans against the column."

"I'll leave the next ascent to others, if I may. When I came down last time, I brought a dagger and a note with me. It seemed to me that neither was connected to the murder but, even so, might well have proved embarrassing to those who had . . . misplaced them."

Epirus pretended to study the top of the column, avoiding John's glance.

"What I did see which was, however, of some interest," John continued, "was an eclectic mixture. Broken glass, ripped sacking, spilled olive oil and wheat, and, most importantly, rat droppings. It sometimes seems the rats rule this city, but I don't believe even a rat could climb a solid marble column."

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"They must get up there in sacks of grain all the time," sneered Theodora.

"We're not that careless. It's happened, but not often." It was the acolyte Matthew, who had approached the pavilion and now stood nearby, listening. No one at court would have dared contradict Theodora, but Matthew owed allegiance to a higher power. "We are careful of everything that is sent up."

"But, Highness, you are correct," congratulated John. "The rats which left evidence of their presence were concealed in a sack of wheat. I imagine they had been starved for a few days. As soon as the murderer, or perhaps I should say his accomplice, slipped the rats into a gift sack of grain, some of them started gnawing on it, as well as consuming the wheat, of course."

"That squealing I heard," said Anatolius. "I thought it was the pulley but—"

"Ridiculous!" The empress was emphatic.

John shrugged. "Our Roman forebears might have thought it was ridiculous for a holy man to stand on a column for twenty-five years. At any rate, Leo had just begun speaking when the rats finally chewed their way through the sack. Some of its contents spilled out. Now, I believe that the murderer had added something else to the sack, a glass vessel of some kind, filled with olive oil.

"It was Leo's practice to hang sacks on the railing, there being so little space up there. Given that, the oil couldn't help but splash onto Leo's legs and it was just as inevitable that some of the stray grain would stick to them."

John turned to Gaius. "You'll find that the bloody wounds on Leo's legs are rat bites. When you examine them more closely, that is."

Gaius grimaced at the prospect. "But why should the rats have decided to attack Leo's legs, with all the other edibles up there?"

"I don't suppose the culprit particularly cared when it happened. They were sure to do it sooner or later. But more importantly, it is no secret that wounds fester and kill, is it?"

Epirus clenched his eyes shut but said nothing. John touched his arm briefly in sympathy. "And Leo was not going to come down to consult a physician. Nor could he ask one to go up to see him. You can see the effect it would have had on the token trade."

"A case of stylite, heal thyself?" the incorrigible Anatolius put in.

"I doubt the murderer expected Leo to take to the skies, either," John went on. "When he was bitten, he cried out, stepped forward. It was just a reflex action. His falling over the edge was an accident. I believe that his rival really intended Leo to have a drawn-out, painful death—a suffering not even his miraculous tokens could alleviate."

"I'm amazed you didn't bring a rat down to show to us," commented Theodora. "As it is, you've shown no proof at all of your wild theory. Where are these deadly vermin?"

"Still up there, Highness. I saw droppings. They might have con-

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cealed themselves in the baskets up there. Or perhaps, and I think this more likely, they've crawled down into the chinks between the platform bricks."

The sun had vanished behind the Hippodrome and the sky was darkening. Jewels in the empress's cloak and dalmatic caught light from the torches placed about the edges of Forum Anastasius.

Theodora stepped towards John, her bodyguards close beside her. "Who is this person?" she demanded. "The column is waiting for him."

"He doesn't need it," replied John. "It was the stylite on top of the next hill who ordered Leo's death. You can see him quite clearly from the top of Leo's column. Until Leo had his column extended with brickwork, the other holy man would have been closest to heaven. They set great store by these things. And I am positive Leo's acolytes also claimed his healing tokens were the more efficacious. And Leo, of course, was being imperially honored." He shrugged. "As soon as I reached ground, I immediately alerted the Captain of the Excubitors." He inclined his head ceremoniously to the empress, indicating the termination of his explanation. His thin lips were set firmly, although whether to suppress a smile or a snarl not even Anatolius could fathom.

The pavilion had grown so quiet that the creaking of carts and shouts of passing hawkers in streets radiating from the forum could be clearly heard. Anatolius found himself wondering when Felix would appear with the guilty party. Why had he been so foolish, racking his brain for an answer when John already had one?

Only a pale wash of light remained around the edges of the sky. It was, normally, John's favorite time of day. A calm time. Today this was not to be.

"You're clever, Lord Chamberlain," admitted the empress finally. "But you haven't produced any proof of your extravagant claims. I'm certain any number of wild tales could be invented from the debris Leo left behind. Especially by one desperate to save his own life."

"Except that Felix and his guards have already garnered a confession from the stylite, naming his accomplice, and I am certain a holy man's statement bears some weight, even in a court of temporal law."

No one spoke, but there was a nervous rustling of heavily embroidered fabrics. It must have passed through the minds of those present that Theodora would not leave the forum until the column was occupied and that it was not impossible she might choose one of them. Eventually one of the more courageous onlookers spoke.

"The Lord Chamberlain tells the truth. I was the accomplice. And I have already confessed." It was Matthew, the acolyte. In the dusk his white robes formed a glowing nimbus around him. He turned to Gaius, holding out his hands. "The rats bit me when I thrust them into the sack—look."

"There do seem to be traces of dried blood, scratches—"

"But it wasn't as convoluted as you suppose, Lord Chamberlain," continued Matthew, his voice rising until it sounded eerily like that of the

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dead Leo. "You see, Leo was terrified of rats. I knew that. And sending up his food was among my duties." The young man's words rang with the otherworldly joy depicted in an icon.

"Carry out the empress's sentence," commanded John, in a voice so uncharacteristically loud that Anatolius could not be sure that he heard Theodora hissing orders that the acolyte be dragged away.

But Matthew was already in full flight. Several of Theodora's guards raced after him; the onlookers streamed after them in full cry. Matthew ran on, reaching the column well ahead of his pursuers. Panting, he grabbed the ladder, mounting the first rung. Theodora began to repeat her orders, then apparently thought better of reversing herself and lapsed into silence.

John strode quickly away from the pavilion, in the direction of the Mese, Anatolius at his shoulder.

"Mithra forgive me," muttered Anatolius. "I accused that dancer, Maria. An innocent woman."

"There was no danger of that being taken seriously."

Anatolius felt his face redden. "But I don't understand. Surely Felix wouldn't have released Matthew after he confessed. But was he really the accomplice?"

"Did you ever see one so joyous at his punishment?" remarked John. "I don't believe for a heartbeat that Leo was afraid of rats. I'm not interested in which particular acolyte carried the sack to the forum. They are all tools, anyway. Felix will find the right one in the end, I'm sure."

"But what about the confession from the stylite?"

"He'll confess again, without having to shout it to the four winds," John replied grimly, "once they get him down."

He had stopped before a street vendor grilling swordfish on a charcoal brazier and now produced some copper coins from his pouch. The brazier's glowing coals cast red light across his narrow, tired face. He pointed out a gap between the tenements along the street behind them. Against the near black of the sky Anatolius could see the faint silhouette of a new stylite atop Leo's column in Forum Anastasius.

"Columns are in short supply, as you noted earlier." John handed his friend a skewer heavy with grilled fish. "It was when you invented that preposterous story about the dancer being hauled up in the sack that I was finally able to leap to the solution. A leap of faith, you might say." ●

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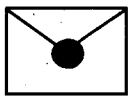

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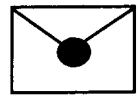

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Of Course You Know that Chocolate Is a Vegetable

by Barbara D'Amato

"Of course you know that chocolate is a vegetable," I said.

"Lovely! That means I can eat all I want," Ivor Sutcliffe burbled, reaching his fork toward the flourless double-fudge cake.

Eat *more* than you want, you great tub of guts, I thought. The tub-of-guts part was rather unfair of me; I could stand to lose a pound or two myself. What I said aloud was, "Of course it's a vegetable. Has to be. It's not animal or mineral, surely. It grows on a tree—a large bush, actually, I suppose. It's as much a vegetable as pecans or tomatoes. And aren't we told to have several servings of vegetables every day?"

Barbara D'Amato is best known for her Cat Marsala mysteries, which chronicle the adventures of a freelance investigative reporter based in Chicago. Ms. D'Amato has gained a reputation for the painstaking research that goes into each of her books, a fact you'll want to remember as you read this new tale of a writer's revenge on a scathing critic. The story is Ms. D'Amato's debut for *EQMM*. Like her famous character, the author lives in Chicago.

We were seated at a round table covered with a crisp white cloth at Just Desserts, a scrumptious eatery in central Manhattan that specializes in chocolate desserts, handmade chocolate candy, and excellent coffees. Just Desserts was willing to serve salads and a few select entrees to keep themselves honest, but if you could eat chocolate, why would you order anything else?

"I must say, Ms. Grenfield, it's very handsome of you to invite me after my review of your last book," Ivor said, dropping a capsule on his tongue, which then took the medication inside, his mouth closing like a file drawer. He washed the medication down with coffee.

I said, "No hard feelings. Reviewing books is your job."

"I may have been just a bit harsh."

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Harsh? Like scrubbing your eyeball with a wire brush is harsh? I said, "Well, of course an author's feelings get hurt for a day or two. But we can't hold it against the critic. Not only is it his job, but, to be frank, it's in our best interests as writers to keep on pleasant terms. There are always future reviews to come, aren't there?"

"Very true."

Ivor's review had begun:

> In *Snuffed*, the victim, Rufus Crown, is dispatched with a gaseous fire extinguisher designed for use on fires in rooms with computer equipment and other such unpleasant hardware, though neither the reader nor the fictional detectives know this at the start when his dead but mysteriously unblemished body is found. The reader is treated to long efforts—quite incompatible with character development—on the part of the lab and medical examiner to establish what killed him.

"That's right; give away the ending," I had snarled to myself when I read this.

Snuffed had been universally praised by the critics and I thought I was a shoo-in for an award until the Ivor Sutcliffe review came out.

At the awards banquet, where I was not a nominee, fortune had seated me next to Sutcliffe. Just when the sorbet arrived, and I had happily pictured him, facedown, drowning in strawberry goo, he began to wheeze. My mind had quickly changed to picturing him suffocating. But he had popped a capsule in his greedy pink mouth and after a few minutes he quit wheezing.

Since one has to be moderately cordial at these events, or at least appear to be, I asked courteously, "Do you have a cold?"

"Asthma," he said.

"Sorry to hear that. My son had asthma. Seems to have outgrown it."

"Lucky for him. What did he take for it?"

I said, "Theophylline."

"Ah, yes. That's what my doctor gave me. So proud of his big words, just like you. Standard treatment, I believe. I have been taking it for several weeks." He said this as if conferring a great benediction upon the drug.

I was about to relate an anecdote about the time my husband, son, and I were on a camping trip, without the theophylline. We'd left it at home, since it had been many months since Teddy's last attack, and we weren't expecting trouble. Then Teddy had developed a wheeze. As evening came on, it got worse. And worse. There's nothing scarier than hearing your child struggle for breath. We were two hours away from civilization, and my husband and I panicked. We packed Teddy into the car, ready to race for the nearest country hospital; then I had called Teddy's doctor on my cell phone.

"Do you have any coffee?" he said. Well, of course we had. Who went camping without coffee?

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"Give him some. Caffeine is chemically similar to theophylline. Then drive to the hospital."

All this I was about to tell Sutcliffe when something stopped me. It was not more than the faint aroma of an idea, a distant stirring of excitement. So—theophylline and caffeine were similar. Hmm.

Teddy had been warned to take his theophylline as directed, but never to overdose.

Then and there I invited Sutcliffe out to a "good will" snack the following week. He accepted. Well, *my* will was going to feel the better for it.

Sutcliffe's review had gone on:

> I deplore the substitution of technical detail for real plotting. One could amplify the question "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" by asking, "Who cares how Roger Ackroyd was killed?" No one cares what crime labs and pathologists really do.

"Agatha Christie cared," I had whispered as I read it, trying not to gnash my teeth. "And Dorothy Sayers and just about everybody then and just about everybody now on any bestseller list—Crichton, Clark, Cornwell, Grisham." In the first place, readers like to learn things. Second, technology is real and it's *now*. Third, it's exacting. Keeps a writer honest. You can't fake technical detail; it has to be right. You can't use the untraceable exotic poison these days. It has to be something people know about or even use every day. Or know they *should* know about. Then it's tantalizing.

But Ivor Sutcliffe wasn't scientific-minded. A know-it-all who knew nothing. A gross, hideous, undisciplined individual with bad table manners. I had once seen him, at a banquet, eat his own dinner and the dinners of three other guests who had failed to show.

So after the banquet I went home to my shelf of reference books, looking for something I almost knew about, or knew I should know about—just like a reader of fiction. I keep a large shelf of reference books. Having them to hand saves time, effort, and parking fees.

What would an overdose of theophylline do to a human being?

I turned first to the *Physician's Desk Reference.* This is a huge volume, 2,800 pages of medications, with their manufacturers, their brand names, their appearance shown in color pictures, their uses, their dosages, their effects, their adverse effects, and—overdosage.

An overdosage of theophylline was serious business. It said, "Contact a poison-control center." That was good. One didn't issue that kind of warning for minor side effects. I read on. One had to monitor the dose carefully. Apparently the useful dose and dangerous dose were not far apart. I read on. Overdosage could produce restlessness, circulatory failure, convulsion, collapse, and coma. Or death.

Theophylline in normal use, it said, relaxed the smooth muscles of the bronchial airways and pulmonary blood vessels, acting as a bron-

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chodilator and smooth-muscle relaxant. That was why it helped an asthma attack.

And then the punch line: "Theophylline should not be administered concurrently with other xanthines." And what were xanthines?

I turned to my unabridged dictionary. Why, xanthines included theophylline, caffeine (given Teddy's experience, this was no surprise) and the active ingredient of chocolate, theobromine. Aha!

Hmm. Being similar, they would have an additive effect, wouldn't they? Synergistic, maybe? I turned to the *Merck Manual*, also huge, a 2,700-page volume, a bible of illnesses, their causes and treatments. In its section on poisons, caffeine poisoning was in the same sentence with theophylline poisoning. Among the symptoms of both were restlessness, circulatory-system collapse, and convulsions.

A medical text told me that fifty percent of theophylline convulsions result in death.

Isn't this fun? Research is so rewarding.

Well, I knew that theophylline was potentially deadly. Now what about the caffeine?

My book on coffees from around the world told me that a cup of coffee, depending on how it's brewed, contains 70 to 150 milligrams of caffeine. Drip coffee is strongest. Well, what about the extra-thick specialty coffees at Just Desserts? Could I assume they might have 200 milligrams?

What the book didn't tell me was how much caffeine would kill.

I pulled out the *Merck Index*, a different publication from the *Merck Manual*, the *Index* being an encyclopedia of chemicals. Here I found that if you had a hundred mice and gave them all 137 milligrams of caffeine per kilogram of body weight, half would die. This was cheerfully called LD 50, or lethal dose for fifty percent. My dictionary said a kilogram is 2.2 pounds. So if a man reacted like a mouse (although to me Ivor was more like a rat), that would work out to 13.7 grams of caffeine per 220 pounds. Of course, getting thirteen grams of caffeine into the 220-plus-pound Ivor was not going to happen, but then caffeine was not the only xanthine that was going to be going into Ivor.

A volume for the crime writer on poisons told me that one gram of caffeine could cause toxic symptoms, but it didn't tell me how much would kill. Well, if one gram was toxic, two grams ought to cause real trouble.

Now what about theobromine, the xanthine in chocolate? The *Merck Index* informed me that theobromine, "the principal alkaloid of the cacao bean," was a smooth-muscle relaxant, diuretic, cardiac stimulant, and vasodilator. My, my! Sounded a lot like theophylline and caffeine. It said chocolate also contained some caffeine. That couldn't hurt.

How could I find out how much chocolate was dangerous? Certainly people eat large amounts with no ill effects. But at some point, with the other two xanthines. . . ?

I turned on my computer, thinking to get on the Net and ask how much theobromine there was in an average piece of dark bittersweet

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chocolate. But I held my hand back. This could be dangerous. I could be traced. Somewhere I had heard of people receiving catalogues from companies that sold items they had queried the Net about. Like travel brochures when they'd asked about tourist destinations or smoked salmon when they'd asked about where to get good fish. Webmasters could learn everything about you. I certainly didn't want anybody to know I was the person making queries about theobromine in chocolate. Could I ask anonymously? No. How could I be sure the query couldn't be traced?

Then I remembered the library at the local law school. If you looked like you belonged there, you could query databases at no charge, although there was a time limit. And there was a per-page charge if you wanted to print out what you found, but why should I want it in black and white? Now, if they just didn't ask for names. I grabbed my coat and ran out the door.

Two hours later I left the library highly pleased. I'd asked two databases to find articles that used "chocolate" within ten words of "theobromine" and got all kinds of good stuff. Chocolate, it seemed, frequently killed dogs. Dogs and cats didn't excrete the theobromine as well as humans. The poisoned animals would suffer rapid heart rates, muscle tremors, rapid respiration, convulsions, and even death.

Dark chocolate, I learned, contains ten times as much theobromine as milk chocolate. Bitter cooking chocolate contains 400 milligrams in an ounce! And—oh, yes!—the amount in a moderate amount of chocolate is about the same as the amount of caffeine in a moderate amount of coffee.

In humans, theobromine is a heart stimulant, smooth-muscle relaxant, and dilates coronary arteries. So what if we eliminate it faster than Rover would? It still had to have an additive effect with the other two.

All three of my drugs caused low blood pressure, irregular heart rhythm, sweating, convulsions, and, potentially, cardiac arrest. What's not to like? Ha! Take that! I thought. Hoist with your own petard.

The *PDR* had said that oral theophylline acted almost as swiftly as intravenous theophylline. But I knew I would need time to get a lot of coffee and chocolate into Ivor. He'd better not feel sick right away and just stop eating. Well, the desserts themselves should slow the absorption.

At this point in my research I phoned Sutcliffe and suggested we hold our rendezvous at Just Desserts.

When the day came and we sat down like two friends at Just Desserts, I encouraged Ivor to try the dense "flourless chocolate cake" first.

"It's excellent," I said. "Like a huge slice of dark chocolate. I'll have a piece myself." The waiter brought the cake promptly and filled our coffee cups with mocha-java.

We tasted, nodded in appreciation, ate in companionable silence for a

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few minutes. Then I suggested he try the Turkish coffee, just for comparison, along with an almond-chocolate confection, for the blend of flavors. He agreed readily.

Now, since he was eating at my expense, he found the need to be borderline pleasant. "You know, I did say in the review that I've liked much of your past work."

Actually, no, you clot. His review of my first book, graven on my heart, said, "This novel is obviously the work of a beginner." And his review of my second book, also etched somewhere in my guts, said, "Ms. Grenfield has not yet got her sea legs for the mystery genre." The most recent review had, in fact, damned with faint praise: *This effort,* Snuffed, *is not up to her former standard.*

"Thank you," I said mildly.

"I suppose I should be frightened of eating with you, Ms. Grenfield. I've read so many novels where the central character, feeling wronged, invites his nemesis to dinner and poisons him."

"Well, Ivor, I was actually aware you might worry about that. I had thought of inviting you to my home. But it occurred to me that you might find it intimidating to be at the mercy of my cooking. Hence—Just Desserts."

Disarmed and possibly a little abashed, Sutcliffe said, "Well—you could hardly have found a more competent kitchen than this."

I nodded agreeably as Ivor finished his third cup of coffee—one regular, two Turkish so far—and pushed his cup within reach of the waiter. The calculator in my brain said that was 600 milligrams of caffeine now, give or take, and another two hundred on the way as the hot brew filled the cup.

Let's see. Add the capsule of theophylline just half an hour ago when he arrived. Didn't dare ask him the dosage, but it had to be either the standard 300 or the 400-milligram dose. Plus he had taken his morning dose, I supposed.

Ha! Well, me fine beauty, we'll just see how inartistic technology is. And we'll give you every chance to save yourself. Just a little paying of attention, Ivor. A morsel of humility.

Lord! That man could eat! *Schokoladenpudding*, which was a German chocolate-coffee-almond pudding served warm with whipped cream. *Rigo Jancsi* squares, dense Viennese cake that was more like frosting, which the waiter explained was named after a Gypsy violinist. And a slice of Sacher torte, a Viennese chocolate cake glazed with dark chocolate. *Shokoladno mindalnyi tort*, a Russian chocolate-almond torte made with rum, cinnamon, and, of all things, potato. Then just to be fair to the United States, he agreed to a simple fudge brownie with chocolate frosting, à la mode, as he put it, with coffee ice cream on the side. I had cherry strudel.

With each dessert he tried a different coffee. Ethiopian *sidamo*, Kenyan *brune*, a Ugandan dark roast. In my coffee reading I had noted

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that the *robusta* coffees have more than twice as much caffeine as the *arabica* species, and smiled indulgently as he drank some.

Two grams of caffeine by now, minimum. Clever of me to suggest he switch to the demitasses of various strong coffees. Just as strong and less filling. He could drink more of them.

Plus two to maybe four or five grams of theobromine from the chocolate.

"What are you working on these days, Ms. Grenfield?" Ivor said in his plummy voice. Could I detect a slight restless, hyper edge in his tone now?

"A mystery with historical elements," I answered, and almost giddy with delight, lobbed him a clue. "About Balzac, and the discovery of some unknown, unpublished, very valuable manuscript." Balzac, of course, an avid, indeed compulsive coffee drinker, died of caffeine poisoning. Let's see if this self-important arbiter, this poseur, was any better at literature than he was at science.

"Oh, interesting," he drawled in boredom. "You know, I *could* just manage another dessert."

"Of course!" I caroled in glee. "How about a chocolate mousse? And another Turkish coffee to go with it." The waiter appeared, beaming. "And I'll have a vanilla cream horn."

"This is very pleasant," he said, chuckling as he plunged a spoon into his new dessert and gobbled the glob. "Actually, I'm rather surprised."

"Why?"

He became distracted, watching as another waiter passed with a silver tray of various chocolate candies on a lace doily—the house specialty, glossy dark bittersweet chocolates with various fillings, handmade in their own kitchens. I raised a finger, said, "One of each for the gentleman," and pointed at Ivor. The waiter tenderly lifted the little beauties from the tray with silver tongs and placed them on a white china dish near Ivor's hand.

"Why surprised?" I reminded him.

He said, "I'd always thought of you as lacking in appreciation of the finer things."

"Oh, surely not."

"All those bloody and explicit murders, or poisons with their effects lovingly detailed. Hardly the work of a subtle mind."

"Au contraire, Ivor. I am very subtle."

"Well, I suppose it does require a certain amount of delicacy to keep the knowledge of whodunit from a reader until the end." He fidgeted as if nervous.

"Yes. Until the end."

Ivor began to cram the candies into his chunky, piggy cheeks. The pitch of his voice was rising, not louder but more shrill. Satiated, he pushed the dish away.

"Come on. Have another chocolate."

"I shouldn't."

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"Oh, you only live once."

"Well, maybe just a taste or two." His fat hand, as he reached for the morsels, showed a faint tremor. He shifted his bulk. Restlessness.

Time for another clue, Ivor. Last chance, Ivor.

"Did you know that the botanical name for the cacao tree is Greek and that it translates to 'food of the gods'? *Theobroma*," I said, trying not to chortle. Last chance, Ivor, you who know so much.

"Nope. Didn't know that. Rather apt, actually," he said without interest. He didn't care about this detail, either, didn't care how close to theophylline it sounded. His flushed face was a bit sweaty, seen in the subdued restaurant light. In fact, he looked as if he had been lightly buttered. He cleared his throat, took another swallow of coffee, and said, "Odd. I'm feeling a little short of breath."

"Your asthma?"

"Could be."

"That's too bad. Well, you know how to deal with it, anyhow."

"Ah-whew." Puff. "Yes."

"Well, shouldn't you do something? Don't you think you should take one of your pills?"

"I already did when I got here. The doc says don't exceed two per day."

"But that's a preventative dose, isn't it? If you have an attack coming on—?"

"Probably right." He groaned as he leaned his heavy bulk sideways to claw in his pocket for the pill vial. Wheezing harder, he drew it out. He tipped a capsule into his hand.

"Here," I said helpfully, and I pushed his cup of *robusta* coffee toward him. The waiter topped it up again.

"Hmmmp," was all the thanks he managed as he popped the pill and swallowed the java.

For another minute or so, Ivor sat still, catching his breath or whatever. His face was flushed, and he moved his head back and forth as if confused.

"Are you feeling all right, Ivor?"

"I may have eaten just a tad too much."

"Well, let's just sit awhile, then."

"Yes. Yes, we'll do that."

Ivor sat, but his hands twitched, then his fingers started to pleat and smooth the tablecloth. He took in deep breaths and let them out. His face was pinker still, almost the color of rare roast beef.

"I'm not sure about that tie you're wearing, Ivor," I said. "It's not up to your former standard."

Ivor goggled at me, but his bulging eyes were unfocused. He blew his cheeks out, let them sag back, then blew them out again. His head began to bob up and down in a kind of tremor.

"And that suit," I said. "A fine, well-bred wool. Quite incompatible with your character."

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No answer. I said, "But perhaps that's a bit harsh."

He leaned forward, holding onto the table. Very slowly he drifted sideways, then faster and faster, until he fell off his chair, pulling the snowy white tablecloth, silver forks and spoons, a china cup, the remains of brownie à la mode, and the dregs of *robusta* coffee with him.

"Oh, my goodness!" I shouted.

The waiter came running. I fanned Ivor with a menu. "Stand back. Give him air," I said. The waiter stepped back obediently.

The manager came running also. He tried the Heimlich maneuver. No luck. Several diners stood up and gawked. Ivor was making bubbling, gasping sounds.

"That's not a fainting fit," the manager said, obviously a more analytical chap than the waiter.

"I guess not," I said.

The manager wrung his hands. "What should we do? What should we do?"

"Maybe it's an asthma attack. He carries some pills for it. They're in his pocket, I think."

The manager felt in Ivor's pocket. He read the label. A genuine doctor's prescription in a real pharmacy container. "Yes. Here they are. At least they can't hurt."

"This coffee is cool enough," I said. "Wash it down with this." He did, even though Ivor choked a lot and showed no awareness of what was going on.

"Call the paramedics," the manager told the waiter, who bustled away. The manager slapped Ivor's cheek. I envied the man this role, but had to stand by. Ivor produced no reaction to being slapped, now well and truly in a coma.

The paramedics arrived with reasonable promptness. The one with the box of medical supplies knelt by Ivor to take vital signs. The second said, "What can you tell us about this? What happened?"

I shook my head. "I can't imagine. He was just eating a perfectly delicious chocolate dessert."

Ivor gasped, but did not rouse. His cheeks were taking on a purplish hue, the color of a fine old burgundy.

I thought of the last line of Ivor Sutcliffe's review:

In Snuffed, *the only thing deader than Rufus Crown is Ms. Grenfield's plot.* ●

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SANDRA PALMER

by Peter Turnbull

TUESDAY AFTERNOON

It was something that a less alert person would have overlooked. A less observant person would have walked past, especially on a day like that, King was to observe later. At the time he was a little slow on the uptake, but later he felt he had to hand it to the woman. On a day when most folk wouldn't be out at all, and those that were out would just want to get home. It was April and the rain was coming down like it can only come down in the west of Scotland, coming down, as folk said, "like stair rods," vertically, strongly, in large quantities. By the time that particular Tuesday had dawned it had been coming down for two days without a letup. The roof of Richard King's house in Bishopbriggs had leaked, and the leak had worsened noticeably in the two days. His garden had become waterlogged, his young son had become fractious, and he had seen something he had never seen before: people who had been hurrying in the rain had suddenly stopped walking and had just stood there, as if under a shower, as they realised that every stitch of clothing that they were wearing and every inch of shoe leather had become saturated; that there was no point in hurrying because it was impossible for them to get any more wet than they were already. It was more difficult in the rural areas where paths became little more than muddy streams, yet here, by the upper reaches of the Kelvin, a frail-looking, middle-aged woman had had enough sense of responsibility to stop, while wading and picking her way along a slippery, muddy pathway beside the swollen, swirling Kelvin, then three or four times its normal size and close to overflowing, because something didn't look right. She had been battling up the hill, with mud splattered up to her knees and

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on the hem of her coat, head down against the elements, and she stopped. She stopped because a dog stood whimpering and whining. The dog stood whimpering and whining where a woman's coat lay on the mud, and a blue training shoe lay there too, and the muddy, grassy bank by the river was gouged and scarred as if there had been a struggle which had occurred very, very recently. The frail-looking, middle-aged woman had stopped, she said later, "because anybody would," but King, listening patiently, knew everybody wouldn't; he knew that even on a hot summer's day not everybody would stop when they came across a pining dog sitting loyally by an article of recently discarded clothing by a riverbank. No, not everybody would stop. But this lady had stopped, wet, cold, and wanting only to reach her destination. Bedraggled and battered, she had retraced her steps and battled her way back along the path of inches-high mud and dislodged stones, back to the village, where she had phoned three nines.

King stood by the bank and looked at the peat-black swirling torrent and glanced to his right at the two officers, Wanless and Hamilton, as they combed further up the bank, their yellow jackets with luminous strips contrasting loudly against the drab background of shrubbery: just as they should. They didn't know what they were looking for, but they would know it when they saw it. The dog, now confused and bewildered, sat in the warmth and dryness of the rear seat of the police car and would later be placed in the care of Animal Rescue. King turned his attention to the coat and noted a name tag on the inside of the lapel, "Sandra Palmer," and the one blue training shoe, newish, size five, mid-range. Not cheap, but not ludicrously expensive. It had also been brought to King's attention that the dog had a collar, on which was a metal tab and on which was engraved the name Benji and an address: 117, Crail Wynd, Torrance. It was a local address and the pathway by the Kelvin was just the sort of place a locally living person would choose to exercise his or her dog. But who would take a dog out here on a day like this, King pondered, knowing from his own experience that dogs dislike rain as much as they like strong sun. King walked closer to the constables and when close enough to speak in his normal voice said, "What time did the rain start today, do you know?"

"Been raining pretty well constantly for two days, sir." Wanless turned to face King.

"Has, hasn't it," King pondered aloud. "Any brief dry spells that you noticed?"

"It stopped briefly about lunchtime, just for an hour, probably less."

"It did, didn't it." King thought that that would make sense. It was unlikely that the dog owner, possibly Sandra Palmer, would have fallen in the Kelvin two days ago. The river wouldn't have been as angry and as swollen as it was now, and the dog, a well-groomed Springer Spaniel, would have been found before now, or before now hunger would have taken it back to Crail Wynd to bark and howl and whine outside 117. The dog, Benji, was bewildered but didn't look hungry. What was likely

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was that Benji's owner had seized the window in the weather to exercise the beast, some three hours earlier, and had slipped and fallen into the river, which had, after forty-eight hours of rain, risen so that it was dangerously close to the pathway. Had slipped or, going by the scars on the wet grass, had been pushed. It was enough to arouse suspicion.

Leaving Wanless and Hamilton to continue the search of the riverbank, King drove to Crail Wynd in Torrance. He found it to be a council development, low-rise, built in two terraces, each facing the other across an expanse of grass down the centre of which ran a concrete pathway. King parked his car at the end of the Wynd and walked up the pathway until he came to the smaller path which led to the door of 117. He walked up to the door and pressed the bell, which played "The Flower of Scotland" inside the house. There was no answer. He pressed the bell again, noting the name on the door indeed to be Palmer. Still no answer. He knocked on the door. The window of the neighbouring house was thrust open and an elderly woman with short, close-cropped grey hair pushed her head out unflinchingly into the rain. She had barrel-like forearms and a hard, almost masculine face.

"She's no in, son." She spoke loudly, almost a shout, in a strong, unmistakably Aberdeen accent.

"No?"

"No." The woman looked intently at King and continued to appear to be unconcerned about the rain. "You seeking her, aye?"

"Aye."

"Well, she took her wee dog about three hours ago. She normally takes him for a half-hour walk each day but today she's no back on time. She'll be sheltering somewhere, I expect. Good for the dog, though. I mean, half an hour a day isn't enough exercise for the poor wee beastie. My man used to take our dog for two hours each day, God rest his soul. Half an hour's no enough for a dog, sure it's no."

"Hardly." King nodded his agreement.

"I mean, when there's no garden to speak of to let it wander in. See, these wee houses, son, there's a wee patch at the back but it's no much for the beast. She usually takes it in the early evening but today she went at lunchtime, only bit of dry weather, I ken."

"Does she live alone?"

"No, son."

"No?"

"No. She's got Benji, her dog."

King held his breath and counted slowly to five. "Apart from her dog?"

"Nobody. She's alone apart from her dog. But she and her dog are close." The woman's voice echoed in the Wynd, amid the hissing rain.

"Working?"

"Eh?"

"Is Ms. Palmer employed?"

"No, son. She's on the Social Security, Income Support, gets her Giro

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on a Thursday. Me, I'm on the sick, I get mine on a Tuesday. I get more than her. Being sick; I mean, I've got angina, son."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"Who are you, son?"

"Confidential." King smiled and huddled under the door as he pushed a police visit card through the letter box on which he had managed to write, despite the rain, a note of the time of his call and a contact number to phone. He turned to go, and then asked, "What does she look like?"

"Miss Palmer?"

No, he thought, *the bloody queen,* but said, "Yes, Miss Palmer, what does she look like?"

"She's an auburn-haired lassie."

"Lassie?"

"She's a young woman. I was young once."

"How old would you say?"

"Well, two years ago she told me she was twenty-seven, so now . . ."

"Coming up thirty?"

"I would think so. Nice age for a woman, you've got youth but you've got a head on your shoulders too. Should have, anyway."

"How tall?"

"As tall as me, son."

But King could only see a head and a barrel-like forearm.

"How tall is that?"

"Five foot three."

"Just wee, then?"

"Aye, wee."

"Do you know of any next of kin?"

"Just her, son. No family."

"No family, at thirty?"

"Just Benji, that's her family. She once told me she was an unwanted bairn, abandoned by her mother, grew up in children's homes. She moved into her house when she was eighteen, never seemed to settle with anyone, then she bought Benji two years ago. That was the time that she told me that she was twenty-seven."

"Did she have friends?"

"No female friends that I saw, but a woman called every few weeks. Don't know who she was. She had a succession of man friends but none of them were what you'd call long-term, ken?"

"Any recently?"

"Tall, thin-faced guy, ginger hair and beard. Seen him in Torrance. Lives locally."

"Oh yes?"

"Aye, they had a rare battle about a week ago."

"Come to blows?"

"No, came close, though, if you ask me. Screaming, she was. She had a rare temper, didn't see it often, but when she lost her temper the world knew it. She woke up the whole Wynd."

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"Really?"

"Aye. It happened about midnight."

King stepped towards the woman. "This man, what do you know about him, Mrs. . . ."

"Baxter. Jeannie Baxter."

"Mrs. Baxter, can you tell me about this man?"

"But who might you be?"

King showed his ID.

"Oh, in that case, would you care to come in out of the rain, son?"

Mrs. Baxter's house had a cramped and heavy feel. The room was small, like all rooms on council-owned accommodation, and Mrs. Baxter's taste, King noted, was for dark wooden furniture which would not have looked out of place in a room four or five times the size of Mrs. Baxter's parlour, but in her parlour, as it was, it was oppressive. The situation was compounded by Mrs. Baxter herself, who despite her shortness of stature, was a large-boned, heavy woman whose presence completed the total domination of her living space. King felt he had to shoehorn himself into the room. He stood on the carpet, between the coffee table and the settee.

"Tea, son?"

"No thanks."

"Do sit down, son." Mrs. Baxter sat heavily on a solid chair. King sank into the settee and at once felt too warm, uncomfortably hot, coming in out of the rain as he had in a buttoned-up raincoat and into Mrs. Baxter's dry-as-a-bone house with the gas fire turned up too high. He unbuttoned his coat and as he did so he felt his body begin to breathe.

"What can you tell me about Ms. Palmer's boyfriend?" He sank deeper into the settee.

"Well, son, seems to me that they've been seeing each other for a few months now, and a few days ago they had a right battle. He stormed off and I haven't seen him since then; heard them through the wall, though." She nodded to the wall behind King.

"Did you hear what they were arguing about?"

She nodded. "Money. Aye, son, they were arguing about money."

"I see."

"Aye, seems to me that it was money. He kept going on about what she owed, and he wanting it. . . . Then he said, 'All of it, not half. I want all of it.' That's what I heard."

"Any violence as such?"

"Not that I heard. See, the folk that had that house before Sandra, och, son, they were a warring couple. He'd give her a doing, then she'd give him one, both had black eyes all the time."

"They didn't separate?"

"No, they died. They were pensioners. Fought each other every day of their lives, so it seemed to me, and then died within two days of each other. He went first and then she died two days later. He was taken by a heart attack and she took to her bed and pined for him until the life

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just left her body, poor wee soul. They were buried together on the same day. And the folk before that were a young couple whose son died of a cot death when he was just a week or two old. Then Sandra came, and she just couldn't find happiness."

"Not a happy house?"

"Not at all, son." Mrs. Baxter pursed her lips. "Funny, isn't it, some houses just seem to be like that, jinxed in some way."

"Do you know the name of Sandra's man friend?"

"Si."

"Si?"

"Aye, she'd talk about 'Si,' short for 'Simon,' I expect. But I don't ken his second name."

"All right. So tell me, by his manner, what do you think he did for a living?"

"Office worker for definite, son. Not just always in a shirt and tie, because manual workers can wash and dress up, but because he had a beard. Manual workers don't wear beards, the beards get too mucky, get full of oil and grit and they find it's easier to keep themselves clean-shaven, son."

King inclined his head. It was, he conceded, a shrewd observation.

"He lives locally, too."

"Oh?"

"Aye, well, he always walks to her house and walks away from her house. I mean, he doesn't arrive and leave by car. You can hear cars start at the end of the Wynd. I can hear a front door shut, listen to footsteps walking away, and then thirty seconds later I'll hear a car start up and drive off. But Si walked. He'd walk and keep walking. No car would start up within a minute of her front door shutting."

"So," King pondered aloud, "an office worker, living locally, ginger hair and beard, known as Si. He shouldn't be hard to trace." King's vodaphone began to purr. He fished it from his pocket and pressed the answer button after begging Mrs. Baxter's pardon. "DC King," he said.

"Control, sir." The voice crackled and had a tinny quality. "A woman's body has been taken from the river Kelvin at Kelvin Bridge. PC's Wanless and Hamilton are attending and request C.I.D. assistance."

"Oh!" Mrs. Baxter's hand went up to her mouth.

"I'm on my way." King pressed the Off button and reproached himself for having the volume control too high. He levered himself from the settee. "We don't know if it's her," he tried to console Mrs. Baxter.

"It's her, son. It's her. My bones tell me, my waters tell me."

King replaced the vodaphone in his coat pocket. "Just before I go, can you tell me about what Ms. Palmer was wearing when she left home today?"

"Jacket, more windproof than waterproof, black slacks, blue shoes, those sort of shoes they call trainers."

It was 17:15 hours.

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King later attended the G.R.I. He parked his car in the car park in front of the main building and walked to the rear of the hospital and descended the circular staircase to the basement. He walked silently in his rubber-soled shoes along a narrow, empty corridor until he came to the pathology department. He entered the laboratory. The body of a young female lay naked on the stainless-steel table in the centre of the room. A trolley containing instruments stood at the foot of the table. Beside the trolley stood the mortuary assistant, who did not attempt to hide the gleam of pleasure in his eyes as he looked at the corpse. King felt anger rising in him as he looked at the man, slight of build, slicked-back hair. Dr. Reynolds, on the other hand, did not seem to mind the mortician's attitude. Dr. Reynolds's attitude seemed to be that so long as the mortician was efficient and observed the code of practice incumbent upon him, he could letch and leer and ogle so long as he pleased. Dr. Reynolds nodded to King as King entered the room and stood by the wall, just inside the door. "Just arrived?"

"Yes, sir." King thought it was obvious that he had just arrived. He was wet, bedraggled, rain dripped from his coat and formed pools about his feet on the industrial-grade linoleum which was sealed with industrial-grade disinfectant.

"No, I mean the deceased has just arrived. It's a fairly quiet period for us, so I thought I'd start work immediately. Especially since it's going to be straightforward. I hope."

"Straightforward?"

"Well, yes. You see, she was fished out of the raging Kelvin less than an hour ago. Forensic pathology is a logical science, as indeed is all science, and so I'll proceed logically, and, logically, I expect to find evidence of death by drowning. But we mustn't shut our minds to other forms of death and we must take note of any other injuries. I note immediately fan bruising to the left-hand cheek. She was slapped with an open palm. Any longer time alive, and the bruising would have entered the orbit of the eye and given a classic 'black eye,' as if she had been punched in the eye. That the bruising hasn't spread indicates that her heart stopped shortly after she was slapped."

"The slap didn't kill her, though?"

"Not by itself. It might have sent her reeling back, knocking her head against something; more likely, it sent her reeling back into the river."

"And she drowned?"

"And she drowned."

"There were indications of a scuffle close to where we believe she entered the water, plus one or two items of clothing, a jacket and a shoe."

"We've got the clothing here, you can check the shoe to see if it matches the shoe on the bank. It's a blue trainer."

King nodded. "I believe we have a match."

"We've also got her handbag."

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"That could prove interesting."

"We had to prize it from her grip. I'm sure you've heard of drowning men clutching straws; here the drowning woman clutched at her handbag. It's significant, it meant she was alive and conscious when she went into the water. It's as close an indication for drowning being the cause of death as you'll get without pathological evidence. But it won't satisfy the fatal-accident inquiry or the High Court in the event of criminal proceedings. So I'll have to open up the chest cavity, but the froth around the lips is another clear indication of drowning." Reynolds asked the mortuary attendant to pass him the electrical circular saw, saying that he was going to have a "wee keek" at her lungs. King felt it was appropriate for him to have a "wee keek" at the clothing and handbag and excused himself as the saw began to whine.

King left the postmortem laboratory and walked the short distance along the brown-floored corridor to Reynolds's office. In Reynolds's office he saw the plastic productions bag on the floor and sat in Reynolds's swivel chair and began to rummage through the contents as his nostrils were assailed by the musty, peaty smell of the clothing, which was saturated with river water. He noted the black slacks which had been mentioned by Mrs. Baxter; he found the blue training shoe which matched exactly the shoe found on the riverbank. He knew that there was little doubt that these were the possessions of Sandra Palmer, whose identity would be confirmed by dental records. He reached for her handbag. He found it poignantly inexpensive, of imitation leather, the sort of thing that is purchased from market stalls to be given as gifts to fifteen-year-olds. He snapped the clasp open. It contained the usual things that he would expect in a woman's handbag: powder compact, lipstick, headache pills, cigarettes and a dainty lighter, a welfare benefits book. It also contained a passbook of the Grampian Building Society. King opened it; it was her book, in her name, giving her address as 117, Crail Wynd in Torrance. King was impressed that she had started to save money, not an easy thing for a cigarette smoker who lives on benefit to do, especially as a disrupted childhood might indicate a fondness for the bottle in adulthood. It touched him, reached him somehow. Out of curiosity and nothing more he opened the passbook to see how much Sandra Palmer had managed to save. The sense of being kicked in the stomach was something King would remember for a long time; he felt it when he saw that Sandra Palmer, who lived in a council house and had a taste for cheap and tacky possessions, also had fifty thousand pounds to her name.

WEDNESDAY MORNING

Fabian Donoghue reclined in his chair and pulled contentedly on his pipe as he digested King's recording of the suspicious circumstances surrounding Sandra Palmer's death. Donoghue had arrived at P Division in Charing Cross at 08:30, had signed in, and at 08:34 he was at his desk, first pipe of the day smouldering satisfactorily, dressed

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smartly in a three-piece suit, absorbed in Richard King's report. It was, he conceded, a puzzle. He reread King's report and then placed the file on his desk and picked up the phone. He pressed a four-figure internal number.

"DC Montgomerie."

The reply was swift, the voice crisp. "Donoghue. Can you come up to my office?"

Thirty seconds later Montgomerie lowered himself into the chair in front of Donoghue's desk. Donoghue saw again the dark, waxy hair, the chiselled features, the downturned moustache, the athletic build of the man who was not his favourite officer.

"I'd like you to have a look at this." He handed the file to Montgomerie. "Do you have anything on at the moment?"

"String of car thefts, a burglary, an indecent exposure. . . ."

"Then I would like you to look at this. It's probably a murder. Came in yesterday. Richard King started the ball rolling. . . . The gist of it is that the deceased young woman called Sandra Palmer was pulled out of the Kelvin yesterday. The river was swollen, still is, even though the rain seems to have abated, thank heavens, flooded my garden, but I digress. The deceased died by drowning; Dr. Reynolds's report is in there. We believe we have identified the place where she went in. It's near her home in Torrance; marks on the riverbank indicated a scuffle took place there, and she has bruising to her cheek."

"She was fighting with someone, fell in, and drowned, and the person or persons she was fighting with didn't raise the alarm."

"That's the long and the short of it. Whether it amounts to murder has to remain to be seen. But it's iffy and the Procurator Fiscal will want a report about the matter."

"What do we know about the deceased, sir?"

"I was coming to that, though the short answer is not enough." Donoghue paused and rekindled his pipe with a deft flick of his gold-plated cigarette lighter. "Yes, there's a puzzle about her. She lived in council accommodation, on welfare benefit, dressed in that inexpensive manner of such folk, has no known relatives, believed to have been abandoned at birth and to have grown up in children's homes, so nobody to leave her anything, yet you'll see in her file that she had fifty thousand pounds in the Grampian Building Society."

"Blimey." Montgomerie leafed through the file and came across the passbook. "Deposited in regular amounts over a four-month period," he observed. "So, she's not a football-pools winner."

"No. Nor did she win the lottery."

"So where did it come from?"

"It is to find answers to questions like that, that you are employed, Montgomerie."

"Any leads?"

"A man friend, described as tall with a ginger beard and believed to live locally. That observation was made by her neighbour on the basis

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that he walks to and from her house, doesn't arrive or depart by car. Go and have a look inside her house; her handbag containing her house keys is in Productions. Take someone with you. Who's in the C.I.D. this A.M. beside yourself?"

"Abernethy."

"Good, he'll do, he'll more than do. So take a trip out there, find what you find."

Montgomerie stood.

"Oh, and before you go you might want to phone the Grampian Building Society, explain what's happened, ask them to set inquiries afoot as to the source of Sandra Palmer's wealth."

Montgomerie and Abernethy drove out of Glasgow and to Torrance amid scattered rain showers. Montgomerie parked the car at the end of Crail Wynd. They walked on the central pathway down the Wynd and noticed the turning of the corners of many curtains as they passed. They turned right at 117 and walked the short distance to the door.

The first and lasting impression of the inside of Sandra Palmer's house was how neat and ordered it was. Nothing, nothing at all out of place. Even to the point of arranging the books in the bookshelf so that those with the tallest spines were at the ends, and those with the shortest were in the centre, with no book out of place to disturb the curve of the books. In the kitchen everything was put away and the smell of disinfectant was overpowering. Upstairs the bed was made and the sheets neatly turned down at forty-five degrees on one side, by the pillow.

Montgomerie said, "You know, I don't think I would have liked this woman if I had met her."

"Me neither."

Montgomerie and Abernethy found nothing to interest them in their capacity as police officers investigating the death of the tenant of 117, Crail Wynd, Torrance, except for a number of building-society passbooks placed in the centre of the bookshelf, just to the left of a Pocket Guide to Edinburgh which had a marginally shorter spine. The passbooks were all in the name of Sandra Palmer of 117, Crail Wynd, Torrance, and revealed high-interest savings accounts to be held with the Ochil Building Society, the Tayside Building Society, the Greenock and Gourock Building Society, the Inverness and Aberdeen Building Society, and the Borders Building Society. Each account contained fifty-thousand pounds, except the account with the Borders Building Society, which contained a mere thirty thousand pounds. The cops passed the books between them, in stunned silence.

"This woman," said Montgomerie, "has two hundred and eighty thousand pounds to her name."

Montgomerie and Abernethy returned to the P Division police station at Charing Cross, taking Sandra Palmer's building-society passbooks with them. Thereafter, fortified with coffee, it was a matter of tele-

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phone work, patient, tedious; old-fashioned policing. All the building societies with whom Sandra Palmer held accounts, each with the Glasgow branch of the society, were phoned, each telephone receptionist insisted that Montgomerie or Abernethy speak to the branch manager, and each branch manager insisted that he return the call to make sure that it was the police to whom he was speaking. The conversations were interchangeable:

Police: Thanks for phoning back. We are making inquiries into the death of one Sandra Palmer, who has an account with you.

Building Society: Yes, sir. How may I help?

Police: The number of her account is _____.

Building Society: I'll bring it up.

Police: Ms. Palmer lived modestly, she was a young woman dependent on Welfare Benefit and had no known family, yet she seems to have had a considerable sum of money in the account she held with yourselves, money which was deposited over a four-month period.

Building Society: Yes, it's coming up on the screen now . . . fifty thousand pounds. That's our maximum permitted sum that we allow to be held in one account. If people have more than that, and so few do, we invite them to open separate accounts.

Police: I see. That's interesting. You see, she has accounts with a number of other building societies, containing similar sums of money.

Building Society: I understand your interest.

Police: So, we wonder, could you trace the source of her wealth?

Building Society: That depends on how it was paid in. If it was paid in by cheque, or money order, or by being debited from other accounts, the answer is yes. If she paid hard cash in used notes over the counter, the answer will be no. I'll have to come back to you as soon as I can, but it may not be today. Who do I ask for?

Police: C.I.D. Reference Sandra Palmer. Thank you.

All the police could then do was to place a notice in the deaths column of the *Evening Times*. The *Times* insisted on phoning back for details, which were furnished together with the request that any person having knowledge of the deceased please contact P Division Police Station, Charing Cross, Glasgow. The *Evening Times* guaranteed the notice to appear in the following day's edition, which would be on sale at midday. Then Montgomerie made a brief call to the local substation at Torrance

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requesting the uniformed patrols to look for a tall man with a ginger beard, believed to live locally, wanted for questioning in the case of the suspicious death of Sandra Palmer. He hung up the phone and smiled at Abernethy. "Now we wait."

WEDNESDAY AFTERNOON

Ray Sussock signed in for the back shift at 14:00 hours, sat at his desk reading the messages which had been left for him in his pigeonhole, read the file on Sandra Palmer to which his attention had been drawn, sat back in his chair and pondered the mottling and the raised veins on the back of his hands, and then received three phone calls in quick succession, each about Sandra Palmer, late of Torrance.

"He saw what happened," said the voice on the phone, crisp and authoritarian in tone. "I'll bring him down to see you. Charing Cross, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I think I know the building. Opposite Charing Cross Mansions. We'll be there in half an hour. About."

Forty-five minutes later Ray Sussock sat in an interview room, a notepad and a ballpoint pen on the table in front of him. Also in the room was a well-set man in a high-quality shirt and an expensive suit. An ashen-faced youth of about fourteen who had evidently been dressed up to meet the police also sat in the room. The boy seemed to Sussock to be cowed and intimidated by the man.

"I'm not happy with him," the man said strongly but not shouting. "We have had words. Have we not?"

The youth remained silent.

"Well!"

"Yes, Dad."

"We're only here because I happened to overhear him talking to his friend, his 'wee pal' as he calls him. Wouldn't have come forward otherwise. Should have raised the alarm at the time. He should have run home and raised the alarm. He saw a woman getting pushed into the river, when the river was in flood, to boot, and all he did was to run home. Got that bit right, so I dare say there's hope for him, but raise the alarm . . . oh no, that never occurred to him."

"I was feart."

"Frightened. I was frightened. Speak English. 'Feart' belongs in the housing schemes, not in my house."

"All right." Sussock spoke calmly. "You tell me what you saw, Nigel. In your own words."

The boy glanced at the man.

"Tell him!" the man snarled.

"In your own words," Sussock coaxed, feeling he could well do without the man's presence, but the law dictated that an "appropriate adult" should be present in such cases.

"I was on the opposite bank." The youth spoke with a local accent

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which contrasted strongly with the man's learned, received pronunciation and Sussock realised that he was in the presence of a foster father and foster son. "I was out walking, and I kent."

"Saw!"

"Let him speak, Mr. Wallace."

Wallace snarled with indignation.

"I kent them fighting, but not fighting, not like I've seen folk fight before, see."

"No! He doesn't 'see,' Nigel. He won't 'see' until you describe . . ."

"Mr. Wallace!" Sussock held eye contact with the man and noted a look of anger flash across his eyes. The man was not used to being told what to do. "What do you do for a living?"

"Is that relevant?"

"No. I'm curious."

"Schoolmaster. Classics."

Sussock thought it had to be and recalled the knee-trembling fear of his own school days. He had thought schools had changed in the last forty-five years. Evidently they hadn't. He turned to Nigel Wallace. "Carry on, son. You're doing well."

"Well, I've seen men and women fighting before but it's always been that the man has been the strongest, but this time it was the other way round. The man seemed to be begging the woman, you know, yon way. . . ."

"*That* way!"

"All right, Mr. Wallace!" Sussock's voice rose. "Use of English is not the issue here. Besides, I rather like local dialects. It's an interest of mine."

"That way," stammered Nigel Wallace, spreading his arms wide in the universal gesture of pleading. "He wasn't attacking her at all, but see, her, see, that wee woman, see, her, she was really aggressive, picking the fight, pointing at him, jibing with her finger. I don't know the word. . . ."

"Goading?"

"Aye . . ."

"Yes!"

"Yes," said Nigel Wallace. "Yes . . . yes. Goading . . . Then the guy stopped pleading, his arms went down by his side, and he turned away. He said something which made her stop goading him, as if he said something she didn't expect to hear. . . . Then he turned away . . . walked away. . . . She stood still and then launched herself at him from behind. She fair flew at him, fist, feet, hitting him with her handbag. . . . He tried to defend himself, tried to fend her off . . . then he slapped her, just once, but hard enough to give her a sore face. . . . She went back, slipped, fell down the bank. . . . He grabbed her, but the jacket she was wearing came off in his hands. I think one of her shoes also came off but I couldn't be sure. . . . Anyway, she went into the water and the water took hold of her and she was carried off. The guy stood like he

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was in a trance and the woman's wee dog was barking, excited like . . . hen the man ran off, like he was in a panic."

"The man . . . what did he look like?"

"Tall guy, ginger beard. I've seen him around, he stays in Torance. . . . He drives a yellow Volkswagen with a black mudguard, the offside mudguard, like the original one got damaged and so he replaced t with a mudguard taken from a black VW and he's not bothered about he colour not matching."

Sussock nodded. "Thanks, Nigel. That's really helpful. Don't feel bad about not raising the alarm. If you had raised the alarm immediately it wouldn't have made any difference. She couldn't have been rescued."

Wallace, the classics master, snorted.

Sussock returned to his office to add the interview and the details obtained to the growing file of Sandra Palmer's death. Before he had finished recording, his phone rang.

"Pushy wasn't the word I'm searching for," said the woman who had phoned him. "She was more than that, very controlling, she had a dominant streak in her and you suddenly realised that you were being controlled by her. She was able to control your mind without you knowing t. She was considered dangerous by the care staff but not in a violent way. . . . My name's spelt with a 'v' incidentally."

"You're a social worker, Mrs. Stevenson?"

"Heavens, no. I was what is known as a 'befriender.' I used to visit children in homes and, well, befriend them so that they had someone to talk to outside the system, someone to speak up for them at reviews . . . hat sort of thing. I got as close to Sandra as anyone. She never told me about herself, not really, but I did find myself being manipulated and I resisted. I stuck with it to try to give Sandra the experience of a relationship that she couldn't manipulate, that was the one model she really needed in her life . . . but it was weird, foster homes she was placed in broke down when the foster parents woke up one day and realised that their entire routine and regime had become geared to Sandra's wants. That happened in a succession of foster homes, and the staff at the children's homes found themselves confiding their innermost secrets to her, talking about their marriage problems even, and his is a wee girl of thirteen or fourteen. . . ."

"I see."

"Well, I kept in contact with her when she left care, oh, ten years ago, and we met on the first Saturday of each month at Mrs. Cranston's Tea Rooms in Sauchiehall Street and had a wee chat. She had developed something which she didn't have as a child. She'd . . . well, when she was a woman she still had the tendency to try to manipulate the world around her, but by then you felt yourself getting sucked in by her, you could actually feel the manipulation. It became a bit easier to resist, but you needed strength to do so. Didn't see her temper, though, not after she left care."

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"She had a temper?"

"Terrible to behold. She would use her mind, her attitude, her personality to manipulate, but if that failed, she'd become violent. Especially if she thought she was going to lose something. Anyway, I read in the *Times* how she'd drowned and then I saw the entry in the deaths column, so I phoned you."

"Thank you. Did Sandra mention a man friend in recent weeks?"

"She had many men, they flitted in and out of her life. She couldn't sustain any form of relationship. Latterly, there was a man called Cy."

"Si. . . . short for Simon?"

"No 'Cy.' C.Y. Cy worked in a bank. I could only feel frightened for the man, to think that somebody like Sandra could get her talons into an inoffensive bank clerk. . . . Cy, he had a striking ginger beard. I saw his photograph once, a man in his mid thirties, still lives with his mother in Torrance, I believe. . . . I thought, that's Sandra, eye for the mother's boys, she wouldn't last ten minutes with a man of the world, but a mother's boy she could keep in her pocket."

The Grampian Building Society telephoned Sussock within seconds of him concluding his conversation with Mrs. Stevenson, sometime "befriender" of Sandra Palmer. The Grampian Building Society actually said, "Sorry for the delay in getting back to you." Sussock raised an eyebrow. "No problem, no problem at all."

"Well, we've done our checks, the account you mention in the name of Sandra Palmer . . ."

"Yes."

"It was drawn entirely from an account in that name held by the Scottish Bank, the Gordon Street branch, in fact."

"I know it."

"Who doesn't, it's the bank's flagship branch, largest, modern, the staff who work there are on the bank's fast track for promotion, deemed destined to go far in the bank, destined to be the great and the good within the next few years." The voice then relayed the account number.

"And the size of the account with you?"

"Fifty thousand pounds. We could do with more customers like her."

Sussock said nothing.

Sussock replaced the phone, picked it up again, and then replaced it again. On impulse, he reached for his hat and coat, went downstairs to the uniform bar, signed out, and walked up Sauchiehall Street in a light but not wholly unpleasant shower of rain. He turned right down Renfield Street and left into Gordon Street. The Scottish Bank stood opposite the entrance to Central Railway Station. It had a nineteenth-century edifice but inside it was ultra-modern, hi-tech, soft lights and deep-pile carpets. Sussock went to the enquiries desk and asked to see the manager, showing his ID as he did so.

The manager's office was wide and spacious; it had soft brown walls

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and an orange-coloured carpet. The manager's desk was wide-topped and curved in the classic kidney shape. The manager surprised Sussock, not just that she was a woman but that she seemed to be only a little over thirty years of age. She appeared smart in a grey pinstripe suit, glossy black hair, rimless spectacles with circular lenses. Her rings and the photograph on her desk indicated that as well as managing the flagship branch of the Scottish Bank she also had time to be a wife and a mother. Sussock was not too disappointed to be closing down on retirement: The world was moving in ways which he found to be increasingly alien.

"How can I help you?" The woman smiled.

"Well, Mrs. Daltry." Sussock read the nameplate on her desktop. "I don't know exactly. It's information I'd like, it's in respect of the death of Sandra Palmer. . . ."

"I'm sorry . . . ?"

"The young woman who drowned in the Kelvin yesterday. It was in the papers."

"Ah yes, not a great deal younger than myself. . . . Makes you think. Is her death suspicious?"

"Well, we have obtained information that indicates that there may be a wee story to be uncovered. In respect of which we have further information that she held an account in this branch."

"Oh?" Paula Daltry reached forward and tapped the keyboard on her desktop computer.

"Do you have an account number?"

Sussock read it from his notepad.

"One Seventeen, Crail Wynd, Torrance. . . ."

"That's the address. Yes, that's her account."

"Strange that someone living in Torrance should hold their account with us, here in the city centre. No reason why not, of course, but we do have a branch in Torrance. It's a busy account . . . a lot going in . . . a lot going out. It has a balance of two hundred pounds plus . . . two thirty-two, to be exact."

"Under what circumstances would anything unusual be brought to your attention in respect of the managing of an account."

"If unusual things should happen? Certainly if it becomes overdrawn we'd be in rapid contact with the customer, and eventually we'd freeze the account and wouldn't honour cheques. Also, if the account became massively inflated, in which case we'd contact the customer and point out that there were probably more interesting things that he or she could do with their money. We'd certainly contact the police if we suspected a money-laundering operation, large sums of hard cash being paid in, large amounts of foreign currency being credited and then withdrawn again in Sterling, that sort of thing."

"But there was nothing to cause concern about Sandra Palmer's account?"

"No, but going back there probably ought to be. A large amount of

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money is flowing through the account but not enough to automatically trigger an alarm. So for me sitting up here, nothing that I'd know about. Why, is there something I should know?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps you could arrange for the account to be looked at? I'd like to know where the money came from."

"I'll do that for you. You'll have to leave it with me."

"Appreciate it."

Then, on a whim, Sussock asked, "How many people are employed in this branch?"

"One hundred and twenty. Cleaning staff are not employed by us, we contract out for that."

"I see. Do you know them all?"

"Yes, to a greater or lesser degree, depending on the person. The bank takes an interest in its employees as well as its customers."

"I'm sure, any good employer would. I don't want to point an accusing finger, may be nothing at all. . . ."

"But?"

"Tall, ginger hair and beard, lives in Torrance, drives a yellow VW with one black mudguard, first name Cy . . . ?"

"Cy Sinclair." Paula Daltry nodded. "He's one of ours, he's a computer whiz-kid, came into the bank via microchips and spreadsheets and megabytes rather than via the conventional accountancy route. He took a first in Computer Science at Edinburgh University. I care not for the term, but I believe him to be thought to possess what is known as a first-class brain. He doesn't exist much below the neck, doesn't get on well with the other men in the branch, doesn't go for a drink with them on Friday evenings, has no interest in the squash ladder. But above the neck, he can blow you out of the water. Why? Should I be concerned?"

"Probably. What's his job, in lay-speak?"

"In lay-speak, he moves the money about, crediting and debiting as appropriate. You're not saying he's been doing it inappropriately?"

"I'm not saying anything, but would that be possible?"

"Yes, very easy to do for a brief period. He'd never hide it, our accountancy checks would pick it up and the money could be easily traced, all such transactions are logged. He'd know that. I can't see him being tempted to do such a thing, but technically he could decant all the money held by the bank into any account he has access to just by pressing a couple of buttons on his machine. He'd be in a position to override all the built-in safeguards that are designed to prevent that."

"You're not worried about that?"

"Like I said, it's so easily traced. . . . It's not like pilfering hard cash, which would be difficult to trace. To do what you're suggesting would be akin to filling your pockets from the till in full view of the bank staff and the police, whilst watching a long prison sentence coming at you and watching your career and your employment prospects and your pension moving rapidly away from you. The only explanation for doing

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something like that is that Cy has gone barking mad. Why, are you saying he has? Do we have a problem?" Paula Daltry's face paled.

"Probably. Is he in the bank at the moment?"

"No . . . " The manager's voice faltered. "He's sick. He hasn't been in all week. Oh . . ."

"Can you furnish me with his address, please?"

Cy Sinclair allowed Sussock and the two uniformed constables into his home and ushered them into the kitchen. "I thought you'd come," he said, sitting at the kitchen table and inviting Sussock to do the same. "In fact, I knew you'd come. It was just a question of when. I read that she had drowned. I did that . . . knocked her into the water."

"Be careful what you say, Mr. Sinclair. I'm bound to record it, you could incriminate yourself."

Sinclair shrugged. "Thank you for that, but what could I do to make things any worse? She's dead, my life's ruined, it was ruined before she fell in the river anyway . . . that . . . that vixen."

"What did she do?"

The Sinclair household seemed to Sussock to be a time capsule of a period he could understand, a clothes rail on a pulley suspended from the high ceiling, solid wooden chairs round a heavy wooden table, huge taps over a porcelain sink, a wooden draining board, reach-up-to cupboards, and the whole smelling heavily of carbolic acid. Sussock felt more at home here than in the office of Paula Daltry. This home was of a period when women rarely ventured to work, let alone became the manager of the flagship branch of the Scottish Bank while still short of their thirty-fifth birthday. He found time to ponder that he had indeed lived through changing times.

"She took over my life." Cy Sinclair's reply brought Sussock back to the matter in hand. "She had this way . . . I found myself doing things that I didn't want to do, that I knew were wrong, criminal even . . . in fact, very criminal, but I went ahead and did them anyway. She seemed to take control of my mind, my will, and when I realised what she'd done, and what I had done, it was too late."

Sussock nodded. He had come across the like before.

"She made all the running. . . . She approached me in the street, here in Torrance. I have never had any success with women. . . . In fact, I'm still . . ." He shook his head. "Never mind. . . . So I was glad of the attention. . . ." He looked at Sussock. "I'm glad you've come. I'm glad it's all over. . . . Poor Mother. This will kill her."

"Just carry on if you want to, but we are here to arrest you for murder."

"Murder!"

"We have to. It's procedure. It may very well be that the fiscal will proceed on a reduced charge, depending on the circumstances."

"So I'll be away for a few days?"

"If you're lucky. A few years if you're unlucky. It depends on what

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charge you will be tried for, the opinion of the jury, and the opinion of the judge."

"It was her plan . . . all along . . . all I had to do—" He smiled. "'All,' 'all,' I had to do . . . was to milk money from stagnant accounts."

"Stagnant?"

"Britain has an ageing population, each bank has a large number of accounts containing all the life savings of elderly people, not a great deal of movement in those accounts, not a lot going in, just interest, and not much going out. . . . Or there are also accounts of sums of money held in trust for a young person until he or she reaches a certain age. Such accounts are known as 'stagnant' accounts."

"I see."

"She had opened an account with the bank, the very branch that I work in. I think now that she had planned it all along, opened the account and then arranged to bump into me and 'pick me up.' I think that's the expression?"

"I think it is."

"Her plan was simple. She'd done her homework somehow about my position in the bank. Anyway, all I had to do was to move money from the so-called stagnant accounts into her account, then she'd transfer the money into her building-society accounts. The plan was to move the money from her building-society accounts in the form of cash withdrawals . . . then pay it into an account opened in a false name at another bank or building society. . . ."

"Thus preventing it being traced?"

"That's it. Once it has been withdrawn in the form of hard cash, it can't be traced. It has to be done piecemeal, though; no matter what amount of money is in the account, the building society will only allow a fairly modest sum to be withdrawn in cash each day. And you can't go in each day and withdraw the maximum amount without attracting attention."

"Staggers me that you went along with it."

"I had had no luck with women, I wanted a partner. Mother kept going on about not having grandchildren, and Sandra had just taken over my mind. I couldn't help myself. Then I realised what I'd done. Just a few days ago I woke up to the enormity of it . . . what I'd done, the breach of trust, the theft . . . my job, my career, my pension, all away. . . . That's the penalty, not a prison sentence. . . . And what all this will do to Mother. She's frail but her mind is as sharp as ever. . . . So I went to see Sandra at the council house in Crail Wynd. . . . I said I wanted the money back. . . . She offered me half of it. . . . That was no good, I had to have all of it, but by that time the money was in her name in a number of different building societies and she controlled it. Like the Lord, I could give, but unlike the Lord, I could not taketh away. Poor Mother." Cy Sinclair wrung his hands.

"So what happened on Tuesday, Cy?"

"I hung around outside her house. I didn't go to the door because I

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knew she wouldn't let me in but I thought she'd be exercising Benji if the rain stopped and that's exactly what happened. So I followed her and when she was in the fields by the river I caught up with her. . . . She still refused to pay it back. If I could get it back into the stagnant accounts they might go unnoticed in the six-month audit. . . . If the right amount of money is in the accounts the auditors won't look further, and the whole thing might have become something that would only haunt me and give me sleepless nights but I would have gotten away with it in a practical sense. . . . Anyway, I said that I wasn't prepared to let the theft be discovered, that I was going to see Paula Daltry, that's the manager."

"I've met her."

"And then I was going to the police. I was going to confess everything. . . . I turned, walked away from her. . . . She went mad. I didn't know she had a temper. She flew at me, fists flailing, kicking, spitting. . . . I'd never seen that in her before. . . . I dare say she had no reason to throw a tantrum while she was getting her own way . . . but yesterday, when she realised that she wasn't going to be able to keep a penny of all that money, she flipped. I put up my arms to defend myself but she just kept on coming, so I hit her. . . . I didn't know I'd done it until I'd done it. . . . She fell backwards, began to slip down the bank. I grabbed her but only pulled off her jacket . . . but you know it was more than that, something more . . . it was as if she wriggled out of it. There was eye contact with me, a sort of 'I'll show you' look. She could have saved herself, I think, but she also knew that she could make it appear as though I'd knocked her in. There was a lad on the opposite bank, we'd seen him, we both knew he was there, so she had an audience, you see. I don't think the lad knew we had seen him. . . . That made him an audience. . . ."

"So she had a large sum of money, she knew she was going to lose it all, she'd rather die than go back to poverty, and she was going to take you with her, her last act of manipulation was to make you out to be a murderer. Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes . . . yes . . . that is what I believe happened. After she went in I went home. I thought that the lad would raise the alarm and identify me. We both live locally and know each other by sight. . . . I was surprised you didn't come that night, but pleased also. . . . It has given me more time with Mother. I was able to prepare her for the fact that I might be away for some time." ●

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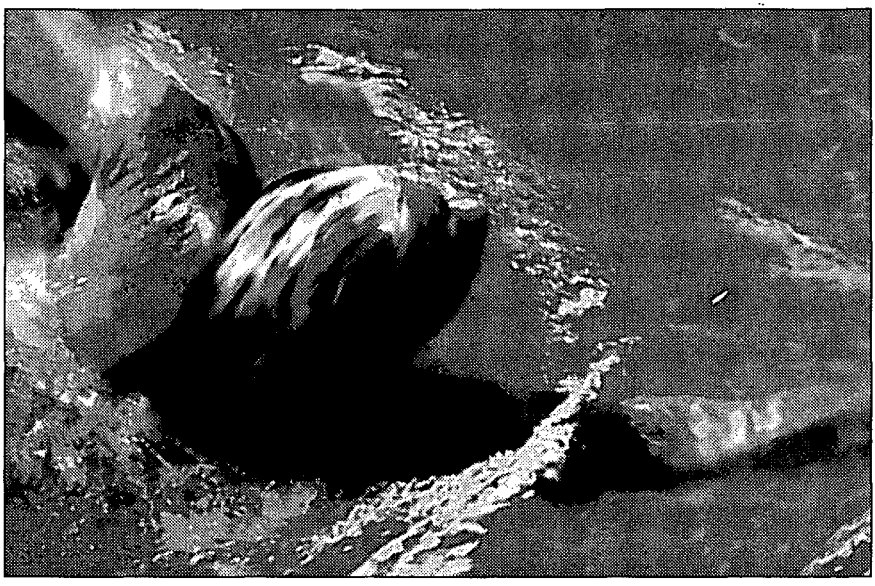

GETAWAY LAKE

by Raymond Steiber

Sue Corwin thought: All the way or none of the way. And then she stepped off the little ladder into the clear morning waters of the lake.

An electric shock of cold went through her body and she went *Woo* and then deliberately ducked her head. She came back to the surface and shook the ash-blond hair out of her eyes. She could see the clean bottom of the lake below her and the sliding shadow of a fish.

She floated there feeling happy, despite the cold, and very much alive. Out on the point a moose stepped out of the morning mist. He paused a moment, then dipped his beard in the shallow water there. The sound of his drinking came to her across the lake. Apparently he didn't mind sharing the Quebec morning with a skinny-dipping human female.

The moose departed. She continued to float on the gently lapping waters, her pale body trailing away from her into the green depths.

She thought: What will I do if a bunch of rowboats suddenly come around the point—the annual outing of the Dirty Old Men's Trout Fishing Society? Just blow them a kiss, I guess, and give them a view of my beautiful white derrière—actually quite pink from yesterday's

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sun—as I roll into the boat and hide in the cockpit.

She glanced back now at the boat. It was still rocking slightly from the release of her weight. She thought of it as a cabin cruiser, although it was really an overgrown speedboat with an awning over the cockpit and a low-ceilinged sleeping cabin in the bow. The bubble window on the forward deck was propped slightly open. She thought how easy it would be to swim over there and scoop up a palmful of cold water and sluice it up and over the bow and into the crack. She chuckled to herself, inadvertently getting a mouthful of water and spraying it out again like a porpoise.

Raymond Steiber's private eye Ben Marciano, the hero of three tales for *EQMM*, is definitely in the "soft-boiled" mold of the modern private-eye. As girlfriend Sue tells us in the following story, "he wasn't the movie type of detective—the kind who kicked in doors and traded hot lead with the bad guys." Despite Ben's more genteel approach to crime, he and Sue manage to outsmart a surprising array of villains.

Ben sputtering awake on the mattress and stumbling out on the deck, probably bumping his head in the process. And her grasping the little ladder and rising up out of the water like some lake nymph in the rosy dawn. Well, why not?

She began butterflying through the water toward the bow. And that was when she saw the heavy-set woman standing on the shore. Her shoulders hunched. Her brown hair straggling rattily across her forehead. Her bare pink legs and blue shorts spotted with mud. A bloody kitchen towel wrapped around her right forearm and more blood splashed on her torn white blouse.

Ben Marciano stood on the shore. Bare feet, tan shorts, a white T-shirt. His black hair had not yet seen a comb and there was a stubble of whisker on his jaw. He had a cigarette in his hand, but out of deference to the woman he hadn't yet lit it.

They'd rigged an awning on the shore their first day there. Furnished the space beneath it with a couple of lawn chairs and a folding table—a place to relax when they got tired of the boat. Nearby there was an outdoor grill made of stone. Jake Sandusky had built it. This part of the shore was his property and the boat was his, too, and he'd loaned it to Ben for a late summer vacation.

The woman sat in one of the lawn chairs. They'd got the first-aid kit from the boat and Sue had peeled away the bloody towel and cleaned the wound beneath. It was a long wound, as if something blunt and metallic had dug into the flesh and then scraped along trying to find its way out again. She'd said only two words since she'd appeared on the

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shore, "Help me . . ." and then just stared at them with wide, numb eyes.

Sue finished bandaging her arm. She'd thrown a man's work shirt and a pair of shorts over her wet body. "Are you hurt anywhere else?" she asked.

The woman seemed to blink awake. "Not my blood. Not this on my blouse. Everybody else's blood. It splashed on me and then I ran. Hid in the woods."

Sue glanced up at Ben. He said: "Tell us your name."

"Emma Chapel. Have I been making sense?"

"You said that there were others who were hurt."

"I don't know. It may be worse than that. I ought to go back, try to help—but what if *he's* there?"

"Who is he?"

Her eyes stared at them pleadingly. "My nephew," she said at last.

"You want to tell us what happened?"

"No. Please. Not yet. I've been trying to find my way along the shore all night. There were muskeg bogs, mosquitoes, owls—I think it was owls—that went swooping right over my head. I remembered seeing your boat out on the lake. I thought if I could get to you—if I could find you . . ."

She trailed off and stared at them again—as if she were begging them to understand it all without her putting it into words.

Ben glanced around at the woods. Maybe he was thinking about the nephew and all that blood on the woman's blouse. Sue had certainly begun to think about him, and God only knew what was going through Emma Chapel's mind.

"Let's take her out on the boat," he said, "and get some breakfast in her. I could use some myself."

The water was too shallow there to bring the boat right up to the shore, but they had an inflatable raft and they rowed the dozen yards or so in that. They cooked up some coffee on the propane stove and ate day-old rolls, dipping them in the coffee to soften them like a bunch of French peasants. The food seemed to bring the woman back a little. Heavy as she was, maybe she suffered from low blood sugar.

She told them about the nephew. "He's been in a psychiatric hospital. He has violent episodes." She gave a near-hysterical laugh. "Oh yes, he has those all right. Paranoid schizophrenia—something like that—I don't know the right term. They've been controlling it with drugs—they make him sort of sluggish but otherwise all right. Claire thought—well she thought it'd be good for him to come out for a week—to come up here and be with the rest of the family. She talked to Cy about it—Cy's her second husband, not the boy's father—but he was sort of reluctant. Then Lissa, Cy's daughter from his first marriage, began working on him. 'Come on, Dad, what'll it hurt?' *What'll it hurt?* My God, my God—now they're all—" She swallowed hard. "Do you know what damage an

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axe can do—not a two-handed woodsman's axe, but a plain old hand axe—in the hands of a strong teenage boy?"

Ben leaned forward. "What happened? Wasn't he taking his medication?"

"He'd hold the pills in his mouth, then spit them out when nobody was looking and stuff them under his mattress. That's what started it. Claire found them there, all gummed to the mattress cover, when she went to change the sheets. There was a confrontation, and then the next thing I knew—but I don't want to tell you about the next thing—please, not yet."

Ben put his hand on her arm. "Do you think any of them could still be alive?"

Emma Chapel stared at them again. "I—I don't know."

"We'd better check. We'll all go down together in the boat, then you and Sue can stay aboard while I take a look."

"Yes—all right."

He got the inboard motor running, then let Sue take the wheel while he cast off. They idled out of the little cove, then moved off up the lake. It was eight miles long, a half-dozen fingers running off it. There were four or five widely scattered cabins and A-frames along the shore and no roads except at the southwest end, where there was a boat ramp. The locals called it Lac Ste. Genevieve, but Ben's pal had another name for it—Getaway Lake—because it was where he went to get away from the pressures of the city.

Funny they'd ended up here, Sue thought, when she lived on a perfectly good lake of her own down in New York state. But it was a chance for her and Ben to get away together, and living as far apart as they did—him in the city and her in the Adirondacks—they'd jumped at the chance. Romance on the installment plan, she thought wryly. And now this horrible business to interrupt it.

She glanced back at Emma in her torn blouse. "I'm going to get her one of your shirts to wear. She won't fit in any of my things."

"Yeah. Good idea."

"What are we going to do about this, Ben?"

"Just what we said—check if anybody's still alive, then tool on down to the boat ramp and see if we can't scare up a Mountie."

"What about the nephew?"

"I don't intend to tangle with him. Why, do you want a shot at him?"

"Only from a hundred yards with my late husband's deer rifle."

"My sentiments exactly," Ben said.

The cabin was the most elaborate on the lake—three bedrooms at least, with a little A-frame addition elbowing off the side. The front faced south down a finger of the lake, and there was a lot of glass to catch the sun. Big deck off the main room, wooden tubs of flowers along the front. It would have been idyllic if it weren't for the body sprawled on the front steps.

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Ben idled up to the dock. There was a small boat tied up there with an outboard angled over the back, and a canoe pulled up on the bank.

Emma Chapel huddled in the stern and did not look.

The bow gently bumped the dock and Ben held it there with the engine. Sue saw that the body belonged to a teenage girl. That's Cy's daughter Lissa, she thought. Short for Melissa probably. She felt like joining Emma in the stern.

Ben said: "Take the wheel. I'm going to jump down on the dock, then I want you to back off into the lake and wait for me."

She rolled her eyes at him. "The nephew?"

"Well, you never know. Anyway, why take chances? When I'm done I'll row out to you in the canoe."

She took the wheel and he put a hand on the rail and swung on over onto the dock. She backed the engine, then as soon as they were clear of the dock put the gear lever in neutral and allowed the boat to drift out into the lake.

Now she had a chance to turn her eyes back to the cabin. Ben was crouched beside the body of the girl. He rose to his feet and whuffed a breath—she could see his chest rise and fall—and stared off at the horizon.

Back in the city he made his living as a private investigator. But he wasn't the movie type of detective—the kind who kicked in doors and traded hot lead with the bad guys. He spent his time hunting up witnesses in court cases, tracking down long-lost relatives, doing background checks on new hires. She thought: That may well be the first violently dead body he's seen in his life, and he doesn't like it any better than I would.

He circled around the girl and went up the wooden steps. His feet were still bare. He'll get blood on them, she thought. Half-dry, sticky blood. And when he wades in to push off the canoe, little trails of it will leave his soles like brown vapor.

He disappeared inside the cabin. She braced her knees against the rail and waited impatiently for him to reemerge. The water lapped against the hull and a breeze tickled the air. Behind the cabin stood the hushed, dark green forest. No one for miles around. Just her and Emma Chapel in the boat and Ben in the cabin and that other—the nephew—lurking somewhere with his axe and perhaps momentarily sane enough to regret what he'd done. She just hoped he wasn't in the cabin.

She heard a grunt behind her. Emma—?

She started to turn but never made it because just then the palms of two hands drove into her back and she went cartwheeling over the rail.

He stepped into the gloom of the main room. It was quiet in there, hushed—a few flies buzzing around, that was it. There'd be more later, he thought, when it warmed up a little.

Stairs led upwards to a couple of small rooms located under the roof,

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and a man was sprawled at the bottom of them. He had close-cropped gray hair and looked pretty fit. Fifty, fifty-five, pretty hard to tell now. He lay on his stomach in a lot of blood. Ben didn't turn him over to see where it'd all leaked from. He'd had enough of that to last him with the girl outside.

He could see the figure of a woman lying in the open doorway of one of the upstairs rooms. He used the railing to swing himself around the body of the man, then climbed the steps. The woman wore a short white skirt similar to a tennis skirt and had brown hair like Emma's and the same sort of body, only not so chunky. She'd left a great smear of blood on the door—as if somebody'd thrown a bucket of paint.

He checked the other room first. It was obviously a boy's room from the things he found there—particularly the photograph of Claudia Schiffer taped to the back of the door.

The photograph bothered him. It was too normal—just what you'd expect in a teenage boy's room. And he'd even been clever enough to put it in the one place his mother wouldn't see it when she opened the door. Not that a mother minded a boy taking an interest in a beautiful woman. These days that was almost a relief.

He wondered where the boy had gone. He didn't sense the presence of anything living in the cabin, but then who the hell was he—Natty Bumppo? He's probably out in the woods somewhere, Ben thought, grappling with his demons. Or maybe not grappling. Maybe listening to their every word.

He tried the other room, stepping gingerly over the corpse of the mother. He saw a number of things all at once, coming at him full bore, so to speak, and hitting him squarely in the face. A little stuffed bear perched on the chiffonier—it wore a tiny pink skirt and had a papier-mâché parasol clutched in its paw. An open drawer with a number of lady's undergarments hanging out of it. And finally a mattress shoved half off its box springs. The underside of the mattress cover had half a dozen white pills gummed to it.

He stepped back over the body of the woman. Went rapidly down the stairs. Jumped over the dead man at the bottom. Then hesitated, knowing it all already but wanting to make one final check. He turned toward the rear of the cabin—and that was where he found the boy; huddled in a corner with a big screwdriver gripped in his hand. He'd fought hard to save himself, but he'd died anyway—just like the rest.

Ben turned away. In his mind's eye he saw the wound on Emma's right forearm. An axe hadn't made that wound. The blunt tip of a screwdriver had made it. And now Sue was alone with her on the boat.

He had just time to think that, just time to turn and begin to move toward the front door. Then out on the lake the inboard engine of the boat revved up and time ran out.

Sue was in the water. He could see her ash-blond head bobbing up and down as soon as he came out on the deck in front of the cabin. Beyond

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her the boat was making a big circle. It reached the apex of the circle, turned, began coming back.

Ben grabbed the deck rail, swung himself over the top of it, and hit the ground. A sharp pain ran up from his ankle. He ignored it and ran toward the dock. Nothing broken, it appeared, nothing badly sprained. Anyway, he could still move.

Out on the lake the bow of the boat had lined up with Sue's bobbing head. The engine revved up. There was a little wooded island out there. Sue was swimming for it. The boat came on.

Ben reached the dock. He freed the rope on the fishing skiff, then jumped into it so hard that he almost capsized it. He swung the propeller of the outboard motor down into the water. Then had to look again, had to see what was happening on the lake.

The boat had changed course slightly. Now it was cutting between Sue and the island, trying to herd her away from it. As it swept past, Sue dove for the bottom.

Ben set the throttle, yanked the starter rope. A couple of metallic coughs, then nothing.

Out on the lake the boat had swung around again, the bow jogging back and forth as Emma searched for her prey. She could drive that thing, all right, but then she'd had plenty of summers to learn—probably right on this lake—before they'd dragged her off to the psychiatric ward. He had a brief vision of her as a pretty tow-headed teenager—standing on the dock behind him with a bright smile on her face and no demons yet to trouble her head.

Sue's head popped to the surface. The bows turned immediately and bore down on her. Her face was turned toward the island. She struck out for it. Then she glanced back and saw what was racing at her.

Ben couldn't see what happened next. The boat swung through his line of vision. Then it had gone past the place where Sue's head had been and there was nothing—nothing at all. An awful thirty seconds ticked by. Then Sue's face broke out of the water again.

The boat turned. Ben yanked the starter rope. Another series of hollow coughs.

He unscrewed the cap on the gas tank, took the top off the carburetor as well. He soaked his handkerchief in the tank and wrung gasoline into the carburetor's throat.

Out on the lake Emma was pulling the herding manuever again, driving Sue away from the island. Ben saw her get tossed by the bow wave and for a moment thought she'd been hit. Then she began swimming again.

Ben held the butterfly valve on the carburetor open with his thumb and yanked the rope. Cough, cough . . . sputter . . . *life!* The boat had already drifted away from the dock. He grabbed the tiller and swung out into the lake.

Sue's head bobbing in the water, her feet kicking her toward the island. The boat swinging around once more. He stood halfway up and

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waved his gasoline-reeking handkerchief. Let her see it, he thought. Let her come for me. At least I have a chance to outmaneuver her.

But the boat bore down again on Sue. He let the throttle all the way out. The skiff raised up out of the water and leaped forward. He was on an intercept path that would take him right across the speedboat's bows. Let her try to ignore him then!

Emma seemed to spot him. She altered course slightly. Get him, then swing back and get the woman. That was her idea, all right—and here she came.

Ben felt pretty cool. He got that way in situations like this. It came from being part of the play, from having a say in how things went. The only problem was that his best tool was a quick mind and the line of talk that went with it and none of that could be used right now.

She was coming right at him. He got ready. Swing inside her bows, straighten up quick, then run back of her and pick up Sue. Trouble was, it all happened too fast. And then there was the fact that a boat turned in a different way than a car, from the rear instead of the front.

The bows flashed toward him. He yanked the tiller over. The bows missed him, but the rest of the boat hit. There was a terrific thump against the left side and the thing went right over. Just a glancing blow really or the skiff would've been matchsticks and so would he.

The shock of hitting the water—he thought it was over, he thought he would drown. Then he kicked upward and came out right underneath the capsized boat—bumped his head against it, in fact. He got his face into the air pocket underneath and coughed water and sucked oxygen. He could hear the engine of the powerboat—the upturned wooden hull seemed to rattle with it like the inside of a stereo speaker—but he couldn't tell where it was. The hull began to rattle louder. His half-drowned brain got the message. He dove for the bottom and clung there and watched the whole thing happen right over his head. The black hull of the powerboat passing directly above, the disintegration of the wooden skiff, pieces of it swirling away in slow motion. He could even hear it all—which sort of surprised him.

The outboard came spinning down at him. He shoved out of the way, and it thunked on the bottom, raising a little cloud of mud. He clawed toward the surface.

His face came out of the water and he sucked in lungfuls of air. Then he looked around. Sue was just climbing soggily out of the water onto the little island. And off to his left Emma had reached the far end of her run and was turning back again.

Somehow he managed to dog-paddle to the island before Emma spotted him again. Sue was waiting there to pull him out of the water. The island was about the size of a suburban front yard and thick with trees and underbrush. They pushed into the interior of it just to get out of sight and found themselves on a rocky knoll where a couple of scrubby pines grew. They threw themselves down on a bed of pine needles and

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sat there huffing in the dappled sunlight. Emma circled the island in the powerboat, waiting for the opportunity to finish them off.

Ben said: "She'll get tired of that after a while."

"That's what's horrible," Sue said. "She won't get tired of it."

Ben dug a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and dumped the mushy contents out on the ground. "At least I'm free of the demon weed for the day."

Sue said nothing, and Ben went on.

"I found the pills gummed to the mattress just like she said. Only it was in her room, not that poor boy's. He tried to fight her off with a screwdriver. That's how she got that gash in her arm."

"I should've poured rat poison in that cut, not antiseptic."

"We didn't have any rat poison—unless you've been holding out on me."

Emma puttered by on the lake just in front of them. They could see her at the wheel through the brush. She'd put on a pair of sunglasses—her own, since one lens was cracked. She stared up at their hiding place with a dead expression on her face.

"We'll wait till dark," Ben said, "then swim across the lake and make our way through the woods to the boat ramp."

That was where they'd left Jake Sandusky's pickup truck. Eight miles to the gallon and an engine that could do pushups with one hand. Part of the deal for using the boat had been that they'd haul it out of the water when they were done and run it down the road to a nearby farm where it'd be stored for the winter.

"I just thought, Ben. The keys are on the boat."

"He keeps a spare on a magnet right up under the hood. Dumb place for it, first place a thief would look. But fortunately, down in the concrete canyons the lifters hunt Lexuses and Mercedes, not ten-year-old Chevy trucks with dinged-up cargo areas."

"So we can get out of here."

"Yeah. All we got to do is be patient."

"And alert."

"That, too. I wouldn't put anything past the Dragon Lady out there."

They both went silent for a while. It actually wasn't bad there on the island, Sue reflected. Scary, yes, but not really uncomfortable. And at least they were together. She thought about the funny way they'd met—two people who lived half a state apart but had managed to bump into each other at just the right moment. She still carried with her the presence of her husband—a year and a half dead now in an icy road accident—and the old frame house where she lived was still *their* house, the place where *his* things were. But she knew it couldn't stay that way. One day she would have to choose—to shut the door firmly behind her and be with Ben permanently. But remembering Ted—remembering the quiet times and the crazy times—she wondered how she'd manage it. Best of both worlds now, she thought. Ben when I want him, when I *need* him, the memory of Ted all the rest of the time.

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Emma crept by their vantage point again in the boat. She'd found a large bag of potato chips and was cramming them in her mouth by the handful. Then she raised a two-liter bottle of cola. It was warm and it foamed over her chin and down her neck.

It should be funny, Sue thought. But it was grotesque. Like watching a dangerous animal trash your campsite. She wondered if, on top of everything else, Emma didn't have some sort of metabolic disorder.

She said: "Why do we always get in these situations, Ben?"

He gave her one of those smiles that made him look like the young Marlon Brando—the one you saw in old movies on TV. "I think it's you. I never have these problems when I'm alone. The worst that happens is some cabbie gives me the single-finger salute."

"The way you drive that wreck of yours, I'm not surprised."

"Hey, listen—I don't hear the boat moving around anymore. It's stopped somewhere."

He got to his feet and tried to peer through the trees.

"Where is she?"

"I can't see the boat. But I think she's up at the other end of the island."

"You don't think she'd try to come ashore, do you?"

"I wish she would. I think we could handle her then."

He started pushing through the undergrowth, and Sue got up and followed him. The top end of the island ended in a fairly steep slope, and when they got there they saw that Emma had pulled the boat as close inshore as she could get it. She came stumbling out of the cockpit with a red can and balanced herself on the forward deck. There were food stains on the front of her shirt, and the bandage on her forearm had come undone.

She unscrewed the cap on the can. It was one of the spare gas cans that they kept on shore but that Ben had brought on board the night before. He'd meant to top off the gas tank but had never got around to it. She began slinging the can back and forth. A stream of gas snaked out, but most of it landed on the water. Finally she got fed up and raised the can high over her head and flung it at the island. It landed top down in the underbrush and the rest of the gas gurgled out.

Emma disappeared into the cockpit. They watched fascinated as she emerged again with a roll of absorbent paper. Standing in the bow, she wadded up sheets of the paper and lit them with matches. Then she threw them with exaggerated force at the slope below them where the gas can was. None of them made it. They all ended up in the lake. But there was gasoline on the surface and now it burst into flames.

Emma gave an almost comic scream of horror. She threw herself into the cockpit, got the engine started, backed hastily away. The movement of the bow sucked a flaming patch of gasoline toward the boat, then flung it back again. It splashed against the shore near the gas can, and like that, the slope was on fire.

It ran quickly toward them. The underbrush was dry, and there was

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no containing it, no beating it out. There was a bit of wind now, too, to drive it. They began retreating through the trees.

"There isn't much to this island, Ben."

"No, but there's plenty of lake."

With Emma on it, she thought, waiting to run them down.

The fire was really moving now. It ran down the near side of the island, cutting them off. They had to scramble down into a kind of bog, but the fire came at them there, too, rushing through the trees. They splashed through the treacly bog, and then they were on a mud flat with a few feet of water on it that merged with the lake.

The boat nudged into sight around the end of the island. They could see Emma leaning out and staring at them. Behind them the island was a mass of flames and there was no retreat.

Emma took the boat out in a wide arc, then swung it back and lined up the bow. The heat behind them was so intense that they were crouching in the water with only their heads sticking out. Emma let out the throttle and drove at them.

Ben yelled: "Come on, we'll have to swim for it!"

But it was too late. Emma came in too fast. Mud and water boiled up under the bows. They tried to splash back toward the island, but that was death, too—death by fire. Now she had them hemmed in. Now they couldn't get away in any direction.

Then the bow stuck. It could go no farther. There wasn't enough water. The stern swung left and right as she tried to bull her way through and crush them, but the boat wouldn't go. She backed off in a boil of spattering, liquid mud, moved the bow over a couple of feet, came at them again. Close this time, horribly close—but no prize.

Emma didn't give up. She had a little more trouble backing off this time, but once she had she came in full bore, apparently hoping the engine would drive the bow right over the top of the mud and smash them.

The bow nearly drowned them in mud, but it didn't get to them and now it was really stuck. Emma threw the gear lever into reverse. The propeller churned mud and exhaust gases and didn't move the boat an inch. She shrieked in frustration, then shrieked some more as she saw what Ben and Sue were doing. Wading around the boat, then striking out into the lake. She found a big adjustable wrench in the tool locker and hurled it at them. It missed by many feet and sank to the bottom.

They found a path along the shore and trekked all the way back to the cabin. "There might be a cellular phone in there someplace," Ben said. There wasn't, but at least they found food and drink in the kitchen—sealed or they wouldn't have touched it. They hauled it down the path to a place where they could eat without the company of corpses.

Out on the lake Emma finally got the boat off the mud. She patrolled around awhile as if searching for them, then slipped the gear lever into neutral and just drifted.

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They sat and watched the boat. They were both pretty beat. But time was passing, and they needed to hike all the way down the lake to the boat ramp.

"I guess we'd better get started," Sue said.

But Ben wasn't listening to her. He was listening to the sound of the boat engine. It was cycling down, hesitating, then cycling up again. Finally it died.

He rose to his feet. "She's run out of gas," he said. "I'm going to get the canoe and paddle on out there."

"Dammit, Ben—"

"I don't think it'll be dangerous. Remember the way she was cramming food in her mouth? Well, food isn't the only thing we had on that boat."

She went along with him. They found Emma sprawled in the cockpit. There were half a dozen empty cans of Molson's beer scattered around her—the extra-large ones. There was a lot of half-eaten food, too, and some of it had been stepped in.

She cracked open an eye as Ben tied her wrists with a rope from one of the lockers.

"You're in on it," she muttered. "The conspiracy. Think I didn't know?

"Get you next time," she added. Then she was out again.

Ben found a couple of gas cans behind the cabin. He got the engine going. They moved off down the lake in the direction of the boat ramp and the nearest provincial police post.

Sue stood close beside him. It was over, she told herself. It had even ended comically—until you remembered the bodies in the cabin. Until you remembered the dark connections in Emma's brain. She shook her head. *Put it out of your mind. Breathe the clean afternoon air. Remember you're alive—and that Ben's alive, too.*

He lit a cigarette—only his second of the day—a new record.

She said: "I wish you'd give those things up, Ben."

"I'm a nicotine addict. I can't help myself."

"The next time you want one, tell me and I'll try to divert you."

"Like how?"

She nuzzled her head against his shoulder. "Like by making love."

"You don't know how often I need a cigarette."

"And you don't know how good I am in bed."

He pulled her that much closer and put his lips practically in her ear. "Yes, I do," he said. ●

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HOME TO STAY

by Donald Olson

Where do you get your ideas? is the question most often asked of authors by fans and readers. In the case of this story, the author, Donald Olson, has a ready answer. As a participant in a literacy program for inmates, he regularly visits the county jail in his hometown in upstate New York, delivering copies of magazines such as *EQMM*. There he meets many colorful characters with tales to tell, and quirks of character irresistible to an author. ✝

"Listen to this, Reba," said Milo Wissman, reading the evening paper while his wife pondered where she'd gone amiss on the tea cozy she was knitting.

" 'Police this morning arrested Joshua Paul Kendt, twenty-six, no permanent address, following a disturbance in a West Third Street bar. Described by police as a drifter, Kendt was charged with disorderly conduct. He is in city jail awaiting arraignment Wednesday morning.' "

Milo lowered the paper, removed his glasses, and regarded his wife with an inquiringly hopeful look. "What do you think?"

In the eight years since the murder of their daughter, Darlene, and her subsequent betrayal by the police and in the halls of justice, Reba had converted those unhappy events into a sort of religious myth; now she cast a glance at the ever-present Bible as if recognizing a long-awaited sign.

"Joshua . . . yes, I like that . . . and a drifter, you say. A possible, yes. Worth looking into." So many "possibles" had been considered and rejected, she'd begun to wonder if they'd ever find the right one.

Halfway through medical school Milo Wissman had known he would never make the grade, had switched to pharmacology and eventually acquired his own business, from which he'd retired at the age of fifty-five, having been bought out, quite profitably, by a drugstore chain. Since then he'd devoted himself to Reba, who had never fully recovered from the effects of their only child's death, and to what they'd come to refer to as the Mission.

In pursuance of this, Milo found himself on Wednesday morning sitting in the rear of the crowded courtroom waiting patiently for the judge to dispose of other cases before the name Joshua Paul Kendt was

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called out and the defendant, escorted by a jailhouse guard, entered the courtroom through a doorway beyond the empty jury box and stood with a somewhat hangdog air before the bench.

The drifter was a tall, thin-faced, and narrow-shouldered young man with unkempt wiry brown hair and, as he turned his head, a profile that Milo found as clean and delicately formed as an innocent boy's. Milo was too far from the bench to hear every word that passed between the judge and Kendt but he did catch quite clearly all that really mattered—the judge's sentence: a $500 fine or ten days in city jail. Unable to pay the fine, Kendt was led back through the door to the cells below.

Two days later Milo sat in his car near the police department entrance to the city hall, waiting for Reba to reappear. The night before, in a dream, she'd seen Darlene in the company of angels descending an endless flight of stairs hand in hand with a shining young man whose appearance matched Milo's description of Joshua Paul Kendt. The significance was clear: Kendt was the man they'd been waiting for.

"Any problems?" Milo asked as Reba slid into the seat beside him. A gray wig covered her faded blond hair, she wore tinted glasses, and the turned-up collar of her coat hid the lower half of her face. Posing as a member of a group called the Friendship Circle, she had paid Joshua Kendt's fine, signing the form with a false name.

Now, as a chilly rain began to fall, they sat in silence, waiting for the drifter to come through the door.

They put him in Darlene's room, which had been kept exactly as she'd left it for the last time, never to return. All Reba said was, "This was our darling daughter's room. I hope you'll be comfortable."

The drifter had responded to the Wissmans' charitable actions without apparent misgivings, even when they offered to take him into their home—"for a few days, until you decide what you want to do"—and now his eyes, green as a cat's and as unrevealing, swept the room with an appraising glance.

"I ain't never had no room of my own," he said. "Not even in jails."

"Jails?" The plural seemed to imply a long familiarity with incarceration.

"I been picked up a few times, bummin' around like I been." Then, with a lightning glance into Reba's eyes, he added hastily: "Nothin' heavy, honest. I might be a bum but I ain't no crook."

A slight speech impediment gave to his voice a sort of twang which they'd first mistaken for a southern regional accent and which suggested to Reba at least one explanation for whatever failures had left him adrift in the world. Only when she showed him the bathroom did his reaction unnerve her.

"No shower?" he said.

"No. Neither of us likes showers. We like soaking in a hot tub."

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Kendt's somewhat pinched-looking lips widened in an impish grin. "Just two old soaks, eh?"

Reba's smile faltered at this inappropriate jest coming from someone who scarcely knew them.

While Kendt bathed and napped Reba washed and dried his jeans and socks and underwear and left them with one of Milo's shirts and sweaters on the bed in Darlene's room.

Downstairs, Milo helped prepare the meal.

"Do you think he's—all there?" Reba asked, speaking softly.

"All there?"

"He seems a wee bit simple. You know what I mean?"

"Mentally defective? No, I'm sure not. It's just the way he talks. No, he's bright enough. Perfect, I'd say."

"You don't think he'll refuse?"

"Not likely. All that money? With no risk?" Something in Reba's expression surprised him. "You're not afraid of him, are you? Of having him here?"

Reba quickly denied this. "There's nothing scary about him. It's not that."

"What then?"

"I don't know. He's only just got here and already he seems so—at home. Taking us—everything—for granted. So soon."

Milo laughed. "The stray mentality. He's like a stray cat who curls up and goes to sleep in a stranger's house with an instant sense of belonging. Takes what's offered without a fuss."

Reba, who had the plump, motherly look of a woman most at home in her kitchen, had chosen a menu she thought would most appeal to Joshua Kendt's appetite: heaps of fried chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy and biscuits, corn pudding and baked beans, apple pie and ice cream. Kendt's eyes grew big as he regarded the array of steaming dishes.

"We don't say grace," said Reba. "We read a passage from the Bible. Same passage, every day. We know it by heart but we'd be pleased if you read it, Joshua."

"I guess you folks are real religious," said Kendt, not judgmentally but as if suddenly spotting the motive behind all this charity and quite resigned to hearing sermons.

As Reba placed the Book beside his plate, Kendt said bashfully: "I ain't much good at readin'."

"Try, please. It's only a short passage. Just what I underlined, see?"

Kendt picked up the Bible in both hands, holding it close to his eyes and uttering each word haltingly, like a child just learning to read.

" 'If men strive and hurt a woman . . . he shall be punished as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine.' "

Milo nodded approvingly and added, as if it were as familiar a litany

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as the Lord's Prayer: " ' . . . then thou shalt give eye for eye, tooth for tooth, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.' "

"Darlene had no husband," said Reba. "All she had was us. The Bible says, 'He shall pay as the judges determine.' Only the judge and the jury disobeyed the word of God. They said—"

Milo held up a warning hand. "Not now, dear. Let the boy eat. We'll talk later."

Feeding the stray, washing his clothes, making his bed, and providing such other domestic comforts as she could offer gave Reba a pleasure she hadn't enjoyed since Darlene's death. But on the third day the strain began to tell on her. When the drifter wasn't eating or sleeping, both of which he did to excess, he was content to sprawl like a child on the floor in front of the TV set and giggle over a string of cartoons and sitcoms, and he had a habit, highly offensive to Reba, of absentmindedly scratching various parts of his body. Furthermore, although the Wissmans did not smoke, Milo felt obliged to keep their guest supplied with cigarettes despite his lack of regard for where he dropped the ashes.

What bothered Reba more, though she was careful not to betray her annoyance, was the drifter's air of indifference toward her and Milo; he seemed to treat them a bit too much like parents from whom such lavish hospitality as he enjoyed could rightly be taken for granted.

"I told you," said Milo, "it's the stray mentality. He takes what's offered as thoughtlessly as an animal or a bird. He's been conditioned by life in the streets."

Kendt revealed his past in bits and pieces, a history of neglect and rough treatment. His alcoholic father's favorite mode of punishment was to pick the boy up and hurl him against the wall. His mother had run off with a UPS man when Kendt was seven. His father had fled the state, leaving his six children in the care of an eldest daughter. There was seldom enough to eat, only intermittent schooling, and then a life of aimless vagabondage.

"Nobody wanted old Josh," he confessed, without any trace of self-pity, "until you folks come along."

Milo cleared his throat. "Yes, well, we don't want to give you the wrong idea, Joshua. We're not do-gooders. We wanted to help you in hopes you might agree to help us in return."

This was on the morning of the fifth day. "We had only one child," said Reba. "Only Darlene."

Kendt had expressed no interest in Darlene, had appeared equally incurious about the Wissmans.

Milo asked Kendt not to turn on the TV. "We want to talk to you, Joshua. Very seriously."

"About Darlene," said Reba.

The young man obediently parked himself on the sofa. Milo sat down beside him. Reba picked up her knitting and took a chair facing them.

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"Darlene was a beautiful girl, Joshua. A good girl, no matter what others might have said. I refer to that oily defense counsel who was a whizz at making witnesses say what he wanted them to say. He turned them into puppets."

"Darlene was almost your age, Joshua," said Milo, "when she died."

"Brutally murdered," added Reba.

"Raped and murdered."

Kendt looked at them, shaking his head. "Gee, that's awful. That's too bad." He spoke feelingly but without the appearance of shock and dismay one might have expected. Then, as if from their expressions more was required from him, he asked if the murderer had been caught.

"Oh, indeed he was," said Reba bitterly. "He was caught but he was not punished."

"Got away scot-free," said Milo in the same tone of angry resentment.

"That happens," said Kendt, eyeing the TV as if the proof of it were there to be seen any night in the week.

Milo laid a hand on Kendt's knee and looked him earnestly in the eye. "The police made a hash of the investigation. It was their fault he got away with it. They knew damn well he was guilty. The judge and the jury knew he was guilty. But there were 'irregularities' in gathering the evidence. The jury had no choice. They had to acquit. Buckley—that's the monster's name—walked out of the courtroom a free man."

By now Kendt was looking decidedly uncomfortable, as if unsettled by all this heavy talk of police and courts and judges. One hand started scratching the underside of his thigh.

"A mockery of justice," declared Reba, tossing her knitting aside as if it represented the knotty and diabolical machinations of the justice system. "The bumbling police betrayed Darlene. They all betrayed her."

"Buckley still lives in this town," said Milo. "He has no shame, no remorse. When he swaggered out of the courtroom he actually looked at us and made a rude gesture. I've kept my eye on him. I know where he lives and works and spends his time. We've been waiting, you see, waiting for the right time to act. He must be punished, Joshua. An eye for an eye. God's command."

"We need your help, Joshua," said Reba.

Kendt looked at her with guarded interest. "Me?"

Milo squeezed the young man's knee. "God will reward you, through us. No, we're not asking you to destroy the beast, Joshua. Mine will be the hand that does that. The police will find evidence, just as they found evidence that Buckley killed Darlene. And as in that case, the evidence will be discredited. The police will be left chasing their tails. That's where we need your help, Joshua. To make the police look like fools. Reba, will you please fetch the boxes?"

Kendt stared at the blank TV screen as if hoping it might come alive and flash him some clue as to where all this was leading, as a game show host might offer a clue to a baffled contestant.

Reba returned with two shoeboxes, which she laid on the sofa

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between the two men. Milo removed the lid from the first box and placed it on the younger man's lap. Kendt audibly sucked in his breath.

"A lot of money, Joshua. More money than you'll likely ever again see in your life. We want you to have it, as a reward for helping us punish the beast who murdered our Darlene and for leading the police on a wild-goose chase."

Joshua Kendt stared hard at the stacks of currency. Had he ever even seen a hundred-dollar bill? Slowly he shook his head. "I don't get it. What you all want me to do?"

Milo opened the other box and from it lifted a claw hammer sealed in a clear plastic bag.

"We want you to remove the hammer from the bag, Joshua, holding it as if you were going to strike with it, and then return it to the bag. The police will find the murder weapon at the scene. They will identify the fingerprints on it. I'm sure they took yours when you were arrested. They think they will have identified the killer. But they'll be fooled. You'll have a cast-iron alibi. You'll be able to prove you were far away from here when the beast died. The police will be flummoxed. When they pick you up—as they will, sooner or later, for you won't try to hide from them—you will profess to have no idea how your prints got on that hammer. They'll be forced to release you. You will then be free to start a new life with all this money. No more drifting. No more jails. You can live a normal life. How does that sound?"

Kendt picked up one of the bills and fingered it as one might finger the expensive fabric of a garment before deciding to buy it. Milo and Reba waited, watching his eyes, waiting for the stream of questions, the look of disbelief and suspicion.

Kendt said not a word, nor did his eyes betray the faintest shade of perplexity.

"You do understand what I've been saying, Joshua?"

Kendt nodded. "Oh, sure, I get it now."

"Will you do it?"

Kendt smiled. "Sure. Why not? Hell, I'd do anything for you folks. You're my family."

Reba rose and touched him lightly on the head. "I see Darlene in heaven, smiling down at you."

Milo replaced the lids on the boxes and handed them to Reba. "When you leave here, Joshua, I shall give you an envelope. In it will be bus tickets to a city in a distant state, and a letter of instructions telling you where you must be on a certain date. You must be able to prove, with witnesses to support your word, that you were not in this town when Buckley died. Am I making all this clear to you?"

Kendt replied in a mildly reproachful tone, "I might talk funny but I ain't dumb."

Reba made sure that Joshua Kendt's last meal in their house was as memorable as his first. She cooked a huge roast and all the young

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man's favorite dishes. Milo produced a bottle of wine he'd been hoarding for a special occasion and after uttering the familiar Biblical injunction proposed a toast to Joshua Kendt's new life.

As Milo picked up the carving knife and proceeded to slice off several pieces of meat and heap them on Kendt's plate, the young man watched him with a solemn air of concentration, as if aware of the ritualistic aspect of the feast. At the end of the meal he surprised Reba by insisting that he would do all the cleaning up, absolutely forbidding her to touch a thing on the table or come into the kitchen.

"It's the least I can do," he said modestly.

Reba found this a most touching gesture.

The Wissmans regarded their accomplishment with pride and satisfaction. So far as they could foresee, no detail of their plan had been overlooked, nor had they the faintest doubt about the righteousness of their cause. Reba, especially, was confident that Joshua Kendt for his part could be trusted to follow their instructions; she believed that God had sent the young man to them; God had appointed him and they had anointed him.

Being the more worldly of the two, Milo realized that Joshua Kendt, anointed or not, might lack the will and strength of character to fulfill his end of the bargain. This possibility, however, did not worry him unduly. Even should the police bully the truth out of him, how could they verify so bizarre a confession? It would be the drifter's word against theirs. Too, there was the very real chance that Joshua Kendt would simply take the money and run, run so far the police might never find him. In a way, that might be even more desirable, particularly if they never did track him down. Let them waste their time and resources as they'd wasted them in Darlene's case.

The execution date for Darlene's murderer had been scheduled as nearly as possible for the ninth anniversary of her death and was to be carried out on a night two weeks following Joshua Kendt's departure. As the day approached neither Milo nor Reba betrayed any apprehension of failure or fear of discovery. Milo was as familiar with the routine of Buckley's life as he was with his own. He knew the hours the man worked, the place where he lived, the car he drove, the bars and bowling alleys and betting parlors he frequented. Milo often felt like Buckley's shadow, so often had he stalked the murderer through the streets of the city.

Milo would wear black, as befitted an executioner: black pants, black jacket, black gloves, black ski mask. Black as a shadow, he would follow the beast to his lair, would bludgeon him with the hammer and like a shadow steal away, whereupon that other shadow, that perpetual looming shadow under which they had lived for so long, would melt away. Freed at last from that all-consuming relentless obsession, they would again resume the normal life they'd not enjoyed since Darlene's death. The air they breathed would no longer be poisoned by the pervasive noxious breath of the beast.

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And then—anticlimax. The most inconceivable, unimaginable anticlimax. It was Reba who heard the news on the radio while Milo was at the supermarket. This was four days before the planned execution.

"He's dead," she said sharply, the moment Milo came through the door.

"Who's dead?" He thought instantly of Joshua Kendt.

"Buckley!"

"He's not. He can't be."

"It was on the news. He was stabbed to death in his car coming home from some saloon. It happened early this morning."

The bag of groceries slid from Milo's hands onto the floor. Not bothering to pick it up, he reached for a kitchen chair and sat down heavily. "It can't be true."

"Oh, it's true. Stabbed to death and robbed. They think it might have been a hitchhiker. They said he had a habit of picking up hitchhikers."

"I know he did. I've seen him do it. I still can't believe it, though."

"An act of God," murmured Reba. "He ordained it but He didn't want you to do it. The beast is dead but your hands are clean. God be praised."

As if of one mind, they sank to their knees and gave thanks.

A week passed with no further developments in the case. If the killer was indeed a hitchhiker, no one had reported seeing him; the murder weapon was not recovered.

"Poor Joshua," sighed Reba, recalling almost with fondness now the young man they had befriended, all to no purpose. "He must be there now, waiting. He'll wonder what happened when the police never pick him up."

"Don't be too sure," said Milo. Like a man blinded by obsession and now starting to see the past with all the clarity of restored vision, he was able to regard the Mission as a kind of long-festering madness culminating in the bizarre and dangerous recruitment of the drifter. "Chances are Joshua had no intentions of following our instructions. He's probably gone to ground where the police would never have found him."

"All that money," said Reba musingly but without regret. "I hope he'll use it wisely."

Milo smiled ruefully. "More wisely than we were in planning such a crazy stunt. My God, what were we thinking of?"

They did not speak his name again; Joshua Kendt was as dead to them as was Darlene.

One day a few weeks later they were finishing dinner when the doorbell rang. Milo went to answer it.

"Hi," said Joshua with a broad grin. "How you all doin'?"

Too stunned to speak, Milo stood aside as Joshua brushed past him into the house, dropping his duffel bag on the floor and charging into

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the dining room to give Reba an exuberant greeting. "I guess I'm like that fatted calf that popped up again."

"Prodigal son," murmured Reba faintly.

"Whatever." Joshua pulled up a chair and sat down. "Oh, good, you're havin' chicken and biscuits. Yummy."

Before his plate was clean Joshua had confessed that he hadn't left town until he'd taken care of "that little business."

"I couldn't let you do it, Milo. You mighta screwed up." He looked at Milo with a flash of mischief in his deep green eyes. "I got the idea when you was carvin' that roast my last night here. My prints on the hammer, that was a neat idea, Milo. But your prints on the carving knife was even better. I'll pick you up a new knife, Reba. That one I used, that's hidden where nobody'll ever find it—less'n I want 'em to."

Reba looked at Milo with stricken eyes. How could she have imagined the carving knife had got thrown out in the garbage, a big knife like that, and she remembered how pleased she'd felt when Joshua had insisted on washing the dishes after that last meal.

"How long will you be here?" Milo asked, having avoided the question as long as possible.

Joshua grinned. "Didn't I tell you? I'm home to stay, folks. You're like family to me. Sorry about the money. I sort of lost most of it in Atlantic City. Easy come, easy go, I guess. Well, I better get cleaned up now."

As Milo and Reba followed him with their eyes, Joshua turned at the foot of the stairs.

"First thing you gotta do, folks, is put in a shower."●

"He's on work release."

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THE KNAVE OF HEARTS

by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

Primarily a writer of science fiction, Lloyd Biggle, Jr., has penned two novel-length Sherlock Holmes pastiches over the last decade (see *The Glendower Conspiracy;* Council Oak Books/ 1990) plus three mainstream mystery novels. Earlier in his career Mr. Biggle wrote short mysteries for *EQMM*; in fact, this new story is the continuation of a series he began for us in 1959. His most recent mystery novel is *Where Dead Soldiers Walk.* ¶

Dear Reader: Allow me to introduce my grandfather, William Rastin, lifelong resident, first citizen, and the most prominent landmark of the village of Borgville, Michigan, population 817. Grandfather is also an octogenarian, but the only person I know who calls him that is Miss Emily Borg, our high-school history teacher and Borgville's resident intellectual.

Because of a peculiar hobby Grandfather has, some people refer to him as a private detective, which is a very effective way to get him riled. Dr. Alford, who is professor of psychology at Wiston College, says in spite of Grandfather's success in solving mysteries, he isn't really a detective at all, he is a philosopher. He also is a connoisseur, as Miss Borg would put it, of every quirk of human nature and quaint facts about anything at all.

It is true Grandfather hasn't much in common with the famous sleuths and private eyes and detectives you read about. They solve one murder after another, and they can't go on a business trip, or a vacation, or even a Sunday drive without stumbling over a corpse. Murders almost never happen in Borgville, and when Grandfather wants to try his hand at that kind of crime he has to go somewhere else, usually to Wiston, which is the seat of Borg County's government and also its iniquity.

Some people think the greatest mystery of all is how we are able to have any mysteries in Borgville. There are always a dozen people who know more about your business than you do yourself, and Maggie Cross, who is an invalid, writes up the Borgville news for the *Borg County Gazette* without ever leaving her bedroom. It even has been rumored that every ten years a representative from the U.S. Bureau of

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the Census does the Borgville census in five minutes while having a beer at Bailey's Bar. The government has never officially confirmed that, but it hasn't denied it, either.

When we do have a mystery, it is likely to be a lot more complicated than the murders you read about. As Grandfather says himself, at a given moment relatively few people want someone dead, but anyone at all might be tempted to steal, or perpetrate a swindle, or just do something stupid.

And in a real ripsnorting humdinger of a Borgville mystery, you will probably find all kinds of people doing all of that.

—Johnny

This case that was dumped into Grandfather Rastin's lap last year when I was home from college for my summer vacation was so complicated you would have a hard time finding two people who agree on what the mystery was. Sheriff Pilkins says it was three burglaries, and he solved them. Doc Beyers's wife thinks the mystery was why Sally Carter decided to get married, and in a way Grandfather agreed with her. He said, "The reason a woman decides to do anything has got to be the ultimate mystery—but that goes for men, too."

That was only the beginning. By the time Harold Grant and that city slicker Charlie Griswold got mixed up in it, this turned out to be maybe the most complicated mystery Borgville ever had.

Grandfather is past eighty, but he still likes to take a long evening walk, and sometimes I go along. That evening we were headed toward Borgville Park, Grandfather grumbling about some program he had seen on TV and me not paying much attention because I was counting up the number of days left before school would start. Just as we turned onto Main Street, we saw Harold Grant being tossed out of Bailey's Bar.

It was only seven o'clock, but Harold was already too drunk to walk, which should give you an idea of how fast he can drink. Around Borgville Harold is known as a serious drinker. He certainly is single-minded about it. Once he starts to drink, nothing and no one can interrupt him until the bartender decides to cut off his supply. Mr. Bailey propped him up against a lamppost and went back inside, and Grandfather and I started past him, looking the other way.

Harold reached out and grabbed Grandfather's arm. "It don' worry me none," he said. "This guy, he don' worry me. She'll be my girl again. All I gotta do is whistle."

He whistled.

Grandfather stopped and looked at him, scratching his head. Before he could say anything, Sheriff Pilkins drove past. He stopped and got out of his patrol car to take a look at Harold.

"Where's your car?" he asked him.

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Harold drew a circle in the air with one finger. "There," he said.

"Will you drive him home, Johnny?" the sheriff asked me.

"Glad to," I said. "But if I'm going to use his car, I'll need better directions than that."

"It'll be around here somewhere," the sheriff said.

We found Harold's convertible parked around the corner, and I took his keys and drove it back to Bailey's. The three of us poured Harold into the backseat.

"What's the news about Sally Carter?" Grandfather asked the sheriff.

"I haven't heard any," Sheriff Pilkins said. "Why do you ask?"

"Something Harold said. Of course, he's not what you would call rational, but still—drive him home, Johnny. I'll wait for you here."

As I drove off, I saw Grandfather going into Bailey's.

Harold Grant lives with his aunt, Mrs. Rollins, and her house is just three blocks from Bailey's, so it didn't take long to get him home. It didn't take long to get him into the house, either, because Mrs. Rollins handled him as if she'd had experience. I gave her the car keys and walked back to Bailey's. Grandfather was waiting for me. I asked him if he had found out anything, and he said Sally Carter was a grown woman and what she did was her own business.

This may have been true when he said it, but by the next morning it was public property, mostly on account of things Harold Grant had said in Bailey's Bar. Our telephone started ringing early. Half the women in town called to find out what Mom knew about it, and that afternoon Doc Beyers's wife stopped by to see Grandfather. She was too excited to sit down. She stood in the middle of the parlor and waved her arms. "Something has got to be done about this," she said.

"Have a chair," Grandfather said. He hates to see a stout woman standing. He says watching her hold up all that weight makes him feel tired.

"We can't let Sally make such a terrible mistake," Mrs. Beyers said.

"What mistake?" Grandfather asked.

"Haven't you heard? She's got herself involved with that book salesman that's been hanging around town. He's been going to see her almost every evening—and without a chaperone!"

"Have a chair," Grandfather said. "Sally Carter is a little past the age for chaperones."

"She won't be twenty-nine until next month," Mrs. Beyers said, "and no woman is *ever* past the age for chaperones."

"Have a chair," Grandfather said.

Mrs. Beyers sat down. "Look here," she said. "Sally Carter and Harold Grant were meant for each other. They had some bad breaks, but I know they would be happy together it they would just make up their minds to get married. This book peddler is going to ruin everything."

"I always figured Sally was derned lucky she didn't marry Harold," Grandfather said.

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Mrs. Beyers looked shocked. "Bill Rastin! You know that isn't true. This is just one of those terrible mistakes life is always making. Harold started drinking because Sally wouldn't marry him, and then she wouldn't marry him because he was drinking. It's just a tragic misunderstanding."

"It all depends on how you look at it," Grandfather said.

I couldn't see that it made much difference how you looked at it. Sally Carter and Harold Grant were high-school sweethearts, and when they graduated everyone thought their wedding day was as inevitable as Christmas. They decided to wait until Harold finished college, and he flunked out. Then they decided to wait until he got a steady job, and before that happened Sally's ma had a stroke and Sally had to nurse her night and day, and that went on for three years. Then Mrs. Carter died, and after the funeral Sally looked around and found Harold had lost his job—lost that one and six others—and he was a lot more serious about drinking than he was about Sally. The fact that Sally had been putting on weight could have had something to do with it. Either way, it added up to a blighted romance.

"This book salesman may be a solid kind of fellow," Grandfather said. "Maybe he aims to marry Sally."

"I doubt it," Mrs. Beyers said. "And so do you. It's never safe to take up with a stranger, and with Sally pining away for Harold—"

Grandfather grinned. "Pining away?"

"I guess you haven't seen her lately. She's lost a lot of weight, and that in spite of her being the best cook in Borgville. The trouble is, Harold won't take this peddler seriously."

"I'll think about it," Grandfather said.

"Do that," Mrs. Beyers said. She went to the kitchen to talk with Mom, and Grandfather scratched his bald head and looked at me.

"What do you know about this fellow Griswold?" he asked.

"Just about what you know," I said.

Charlie Griswold had come to Borgville a month before and rented a room from Ada Smith, over on Oak Street. He was selling sets of encyclopedias, and most of the families in town bought from him. When he finished there he started calling on the farmers, and from what I heard he was still doing well. When he first arrived, it only took him about a week to get acquainted with everyone in town. Most people liked him. He had a smile for everyone, and he enjoyed talking to folks, and if you didn't mind the way he mashed your fingers shaking hands, he was easy to get along with.

"Griswold seems to be a steady worker," Grandfather said, "and I notice he doesn't waste any time in Bailey's. How old would you say he is? Thirty-five?"

I hadn't any idea.

"I don't see that it's anything to get excited about," Grandfather said. "Just because Sally lives alone out on the edge of town, these women think there's something sneaky about Griswold calling on her. On the

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other hand, we don't know anything about Griswold, and he may not be up to any good. I'll have to think about it."

That night someone broke into Mr. Gregory's Star Restaurant and emptied the cash register. There wasn't much money in it—only twenty-two dollars and sixty-seven cents in change and small bills, and it was insured. But we don't often have a burglar working in Borgville, and it caused quite a stir.

Sheriff Pilkins came around to talk to Grandfather about it. "Hear about the Star Restaurant?" he asked.

Grandfather said testily, "Since I'm not deaf—"

"Got any ideas?"

"No," Grandfather said. "Should I have?"

"It could have been kids, I suppose. If it wasn't, I figure it was a stranger. Anyone from around here would know Gregory puts most of the restaurant money in the night deposit. There's only one stranger in Borgville. What do you think?"

"If you mean this fellow Griswold, I'd say he's been making too much money selling books to bother with burglaries at twenty bucks a crack."

"He didn't know there'd only be twenty bucks there," the sheriff said. "He eats at the restaurant when Sally Carter isn't feeding him, and Gregory says he was there three times yesterday. He had breakfast there, and in the afternoon and again late in the evening he stopped in for coffee. Could be he was casing the place."

"Could be," Grandfather agreed. "How are you going to prove it?"

"I don't know. Ada Smith says she didn't hear him go out during the night, but you know how deaf she is. If he fell down the stairs she'd never know it. Well, he didn't get much, and he'll know better than to try it again."

That night someone broke into Snubbs's Hardware Store and got fourteen dollars from the cash register. And the next night Dimmit's Grocery was taken for twenty-six dollars. The sheriff moved into town with four deputies, and he even had a fellow from the state police post at Wiston looking for fingerprints.

For the next few days, no one talked about anything but the burglaries, and when Mrs. Beyers came over to see Grandfather on Friday he'd forgotten all about Sally Carter.

"Well, what are you going to do about it?" she demanded.

"That's Pilkins's job," Grandfather said, thinking she meant the burglaries.

"Pilkins, nothing," Mrs. Beyers said. "I asked him to help, and he said it was none of his business who courted Sally Carter. For two cents I'd run for sheriff myself. What are you going to do? You said you'd help."

"I didn't," Grandfather said. "I said I'd think about it. I'm still thinking."

She worked on him, but that was as much as he would say. After she left he went up to his room, and I heard his rocking chair start up.

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That's what he does when he has a problem—he rocks on it. He rocked most of the afternoon on that one, and I didn't see him again until suppertime, when I started out to the kitchen to see what Mom was fixing.

"I won't be here for supper," I heard him say to Mom as I came down the hallway. I don't know what she said or if she said anything at all because Grandfather walked out of the kitchen, and I nearly fainted. He had on his Sunday suit, and a white shirt, and the polka-dot bow tie I gave him for Christmas, and his new straw hat. He nodded at me as he went by, and he was out the front door before I could get my mouth closed.

In the kitchen I found Mom still shaking her head. "I guess it's a good thing he hasn't got any hair," she said. "He'd've curled it. Now what do you suppose he's up to?"

"I'd better have a look," I said.

She called me back twice as I went out the door. If she had meant it, she would have called four times and come out on the porch after me, so I didn't even slow down. Grandfather was out of sight when I hit the sidewalk, but I didn't need a bloodhound to tell me where he was headed. I took the alleys straight across town, circled around through Simmond's wood lot, and came out behind Sally Carter's house.

Mr. Griswold was sitting at the picnic table in the backyard. He was a big fellow with a hefty build, and he had curly hair and a neat little moustache. I thought he was pretty good-looking. Probably it was the way he dressed that got Mrs. Beyers down on him so—he had on one of those funny-colored sport shirts that no Borgville man would have dared to wear in public.

Sally Carter came out of the house a minute later, carrying a tray, and she went to work at the outdoor fireplace. She had lost a lot of weight since I'd seen her last. I had forgotten how pretty she was before she got fat. She had on a white dress and a little blue apron, and she really looked nice.

I was afraid there'd be fireworks when Grandfather came busting in on Mr. Griswold's date, but nothing much happened. Mr. Griswold shook hands with Grandfather, and the two of them talked while Sally worked on the food, and then all three sat down to eat.

Mr. Griswold took his eating seriously. Grandfather and Sally did some talking along the way, but he didn't say a thing except to ask them to pass the barbecued chicken again, or the hot rolls, or the potato salad, or the meatballs, and as a result he was running about two laps ahead when he got to the dessert. I noticed there were three kinds of pie on the table, and Mr. Griswold had generous samples of all three. Then he shook Grandfather's hand again, said something to Sally, and left.

That was as much as I could stand on an empty stomach. I ducked out and ran all the way home.

Mrs. Golden telephoned while I was eating supper. She said she'd seen Grandfather, dressed fit to kill, heading toward Sally Carter's house, and she wanted to know what he was doing. Mom told her to call back if

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she found out. Then Mrs. Pobloch called, and Maggie Cross, and Elizabeth Peterson, and when it dawned on us that everyone in town was waiting in line to call our number, we stopped answering the phone.

Mom wanted to know if Sally and Mr. Griswold had acted romantic. I told her Mr. Griswold hadn't acted anything but hungry, and if that bothered Sally, she had kept it to herself.

Mom shook her head. "Sally just doesn't have any luck. I feel sorry for her."

When I finished eating, we went out on the porch to wait for Grandfather. He wasn't in sight, but Harold Grant had driven up in front of our house and parked, if you want to call it that, with one wheel right in the middle of Mom's big bed of moss roses. He stayed in his car, and Mom and I stayed on the porch, and about fifteen minutes later Grandfather came walking up the street.

Harold got out of his car and staggered up the sidewalk to meet him. He didn't say anything. He took a wild swing, missed Grandfather by two feet, and fell flat on his face. Grandfather paid no attention to him.

Harold got up and came after Grandfather, but with the load of liquor he was carrying he couldn't make very good time, and Grandfather was turning in at our house when Harold finally caught up with him.

"You dirty so-and-so," Harold said and swung again.

Grandfather grabbed Harold by the shoulders and shook him. As a young man he had been the village blacksmith, and he still had the build for it. Harold kept trying to punch him, and missing, and Grandfather kept shaking him, and finally Grandfather let go and Harold sat down hard on the sidewalk.

"What were you doing at Sally's?" Harold demanded.

"I don't figure it's any of your business," Grandfather said, "but I'll tell you anyway. I always thought you were going to marry Sally, but since you're giving this book salesman a clear field, I've decided to marry her myself."

"You!" Harold exclaimed. "You've got grandchildren older than she is!"

"What does that have to do with it?" Grandfather asked him. He called to me, "Johnny, you'd better drive Harold home."

"I'll drive myself home," Harold said.

He ran over the curb three times in the first block, but he finally made it down to Main Street and around the corner. Grandfather came up on the porch and sat down in his favorite glider.

"Was that necessary?" Mom asked.

"I don't know," Grandfather said. "Maybe not. Time will tell."

The next day, Saturday, Sheriff Pilkins was back to see Grandfather. "This is the big day of the week for most of the stores," he said, "and if that burglar is going to work again, it'll be tonight. Of course, there won't be a dime left in any of the cash registers, but he won't know that. I'm looking for volunteers to watch for him."

"You aren't looking for me," Grandfather said. "I have a date tonight."

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"I heard about that, but I didn't believe it. Just what have you got up your sleeve?"

"It isn't a burglar," Grandfather said. "What's Harold Grant doing this morning?"

"Getting drunk, I suppose. What's he got to do with it?"

"Like I said, I'm thinking about something else. Go catch your own burglar."

"Why would Harold break into a place for a few bucks?" the sheriff wanted to know. "His aunt gives him more spending money than most men earn. She even bought that convertible for him."

"Forget it," Grandfather said.

I told the sheriff I would help him. "I know a lot of fellows who would like to catch a burglar," I said.

"I don't need many," the sheriff said. "Just half a dozen that haven't got hay fever and can keep their mouths shut. Think you can find them for me?"

"Sure. They would have to tell their folks, though."

"Then pick six that have folks that can keep their mouths shut."

I went to work on it, and by noon we had everything arranged. The sheriff put one of his deputies in charge on each side of Main Street, and he found a few men who were willing to help out, and we went around picking places to watch from. Grandfather said it was a cinch Borgville would be better guarded that night than anytime since World War II, when it had twelve air-raid wardens in every block because there were that many men who wanted to do something for the war effort.

At suppertime Grandfather dressed up again and went over to Sally Carter's. I was worried about him because there was no telling what darned fool stunt Harold Grant might try to pull when he was drinking, and even though Mr. Griswold hadn't acted romantic the night before, there was no guarantee that he would be hungry every night.

When it started to get dark, I took the lunch Mom had fixed for me and headed uptown. I was wishing I'd kept my mouth shut and let the sheriff dig up his own night watchmen. I figured that any action Borgville enjoyed that night would happen at Sally Carter's house, and it wouldn't be a burglary.

I met Mrs. Beyers on Main Street, and she grabbed me and yelled, "Have you seen Harold?"

"No," I said, wondering if Grandfather had hung one on him.

"I saw him five minutes ago, and he's *sober!* This is the first Saturday night in years he hasn't been drinking. Your grandfather certainly is a dear. He straightened Harold out in a hurry."

"He didn't exactly straighten him out," I said. "He just shook him a little."

"Whatever it was, it was just what he needed," Mrs. Beyers said.

Main Street is always crowded on Saturday night, and that night people had their choice of three things to talk about—the burglaries, or Grandfather courting Sally Carter, or Harold Grant being sober. Most

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of the conversational groups I overheard were covering all three thoroughly. I went down behind the bank and checked in with Steve Carling, Sheriff Pilkins's deputy, and he put me in a clump of bushes behind Jake Palmer's barbershop. By that time I was sure I had made a mistake. Nobody with any sense would try to burgle a barbershop, and there I was, stuck for the night.

I finished all of the food Mom gave me in the first twenty minutes, and then I sat there in the bushes and tried to swat mosquitoes without making any noise. Jake closed his barbershop at ten. He left a light on in one of his rear windows, which probably was Sheriff Pilkins's idea. A couple of the other stores had done the same thing. It didn't exactly floodlight the alley, but it helped.

By holding my watch just right I could see what time it was, and it read a little after midnight when Steve Carling came tiptoeing along. He said things were quiet everywhere except at Bailey's Bar, which was still open. "I figure Bailey's is where he'll hit," Steve said. "Places that close late sometimes are careless about their money."

"I'll bet Mr. Bailey won't be careless tonight," I said.

Steve grunted and handed me a sandwich and a bottle of pop, compliments of the sheriff. That was nice of Sheriff Pilkins, but by that time I wasn't in a grateful mood. I asked Steve if he wanted a deposit on the bottle, and he said no, he would pick it up on his next trip through, which would be about three A.M., and I felt like hitting him with it.

One o'clock sneaked past, and at one twenty-seven—I had just looked at my watch—I saw a shadow feeling its way along the buildings. I sat tight and waited, and the shadow kept coming. When it got even with me I yelled and jumped at it. The shadow let out a squawk and took off, but I caught it in about three long jumps and brought it down with a tackle that was so pretty I was sorry there wasn't anyone around to see it. One of the men came running down the alley to help me and got kicked good in the shins, and I got half the skin scratched off one arm, and in case you've ever tangled with a bobcat in the dark you will know how we felt.

In nothing flat there was a crowd there, and the shadow stopped struggling. Sheriff Pilkins came stumbling along with a flashlight, and all of us backed off and stared.

The shadow was Sally Carter.

"I'll be derned," the sheriff said.

Sally sat there on the ground with the light shining in her face, looking scared to death. She was wearing a man's overalls that were not exactly form-fitting, but she was just as pretty as she had been the day before all dressed up.

"So it was you!" the sheriff exclaimed.

Sally started to cry. "I want to go home," she sobbed, and the sheriff couldn't get her to say another word.

Steve Carling wanted to haul her off to Wiston and lock her up. "She'll talk plenty after a night in jail," he said.

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Mr. Crabtree, who is janitor for the First Baptist Church, said Sally hadn't done anything except walk down the alley in the dark, which wasn't exactly illegal, and there was no sign of any burglar tools on her, and if he was her he would sue all of us for assault. Sheriff Pilkins told him he wasn't her and he should keep his mouth shut.

"I'll drive her home," the sheriff said. "Maybe we can get this mess straightened out there."

An argument started, but I didn't have to hear the end of it to know how it would turn out. Grandfather is the only one in Borgville who wins arguments with Sheriff Pilkins. I headed off down the alley, and Mr. Crabtree trotted beside me.

"I'm going after that fellow Griswold," he said. "The little lady needs someone to look after her."

I tore for home, got Grandfather out of bed, and told him what had happened. He was pulling his clothes on while I talked, and we both took off at a run for Sally Carter's house, Grandfather in the lead and me panting to keep up with him. We got there just as the sheriff arrived.

"What do you want?" the sheriff demanded.

"I've been courting this girl, haven't I?" Grandfather asked. "If she's in trouble, I aim to stand by her."

Sally, who was still crying and mopping her face with a handkerchief someone had given her, suddenly had a coughing fit.

The sheriff said to me, "Don't tell me you've been courting her, too."

"No," I said, "but I'm the one who caught her."

"All right," Sheriff Pilkins said disgustedly. "You two seem to think you have more business here than I have. Maybe you should take over while I go home to bed."

But he let both of us stay, and a moment later the door jerked open and Mr. Griswold came in. He was a sight. He had on yellow pajamas with big red flowers on them. He rubbed his eyes and directed a yawn at everyone present.

"What's the trouble, babe?" he asked Sally.

Sally buried her face in her hands and really started to howl.

Mr. Griswold turned on the sheriff. He had both fists doubled up, and he looked as though he knew how to use them. "Get off her back," he said. "She hasn't done anything."

"That's what you think," Sheriff Pilkins said. "Three burglaries. Breaking and entering. And I'd just like to know why."

Sally didn't say anything. She couldn't, because she was bawling at the top of her voice.

"*You* did that?" Mr. Griswold asked her incredulously. "You must have had a reason. Tell him why, babe, so we can all go back to bed."

I wanted to point out that some of us hadn't been to bed, but Mr. Griswold didn't look as though he would welcome corrections. His build was something like Grandfather's, and he was a whole lot younger.

"Well, Sally?" the sheriff said.

"It's been hard," Sally said between sobs. "There hasn't been much

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money since Mother died, and I loved having someone to cook for, and I had to buy groceries somehow, didn't I?"

All of us stared at her. Mr. Griswold managed a real eloquent "Huh?" Sheriff Pilkins commenced scratching his head. "I'll be derned. You mean—"

"Charles was coming for supper every day, and sometimes for lunch, and I enjoyed it so, and there just wasn't any other way. Don't you see?"

The sheriff stepped forward to say something, and Mr. Griswold shoved him aside. "Babe!" he exclaimed. "Do you mean to say you busted into those places just to get money to feed me?"

Sally started bawling again.

"That's a hot one," Mr. Griswold said. "A dame stealing to feed Charlie Griswold. I never thought I'd live to see that." He turned to the sheriff. "What's the damage, pal?"

"Well, now," Sheriff Pilkins said. "I suppose if the money was returned and the breaking-in damage taken care of—and that wouldn't amount to much—none of the merchants would want to prosecute. A hundred dollars ought to cover it."

Mr. Griswold pulled up his pajama tops and went to work on a money belt. "Here's a hundred," he said, handing a bill to the sheriff. "Anything left over, give it to the boy scouts or something. And tell me, pal. What's the quickest way for a couple to get spliced in this burg?"

Sally let out a squeal. "Charles!"

"Yep. I always figured I'd be a bachelor all my life. I like to travel, and I like the selling game. But if a gal wants to cook for me that badly, I say she's got herself a job. Hey, babe—do you suppose you could cook in one of those house trailers the way you do in that kitchen?"

"Try me!" Sally yelled. She jumped into his arms, and Sheriff Pilkins herded Grandfather and me toward the door.

"The meeting," he announced, "is adjourned."

We took our time walking home. Grandfather kept shaking his head. "Now what do you make of that?" he asked me finally.

I didn't know what to make of it.

"I'll tell you this much," Grandfather said. "It doesn't make sense."

I didn't see Sheriff Pilkins again for a week. By then Sally Carter and her new husband were on their way to Niagara Falls, but a few of Grandfather's friends were still joshing him about losing his girl. Harold Grant, after dropping completely out of sight for a few days, was back in town. His car was parked in front of Bailey's Bar.

Grandfather was sitting on the bench in front of Jake Palmer's barbershop reading Mr. Snubbs's morning paper when the sheriff drove up. The sheriff got out and came over and sat down beside Grandfather, who nodded at him without looking up from the paper.

"I'd like to know something," Sheriff Pilkins said.

Grandfather turned a page without saying anything.

"Sally Carter," the sheriff said. "Griswold, I mean. I been doing some

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checking. Her pa had money, and even though it cost something with her ma being sick for so long, she had plenty left over. She's been running five or six hundred dollars through her checking account every month, and that's plenty of money for a single woman in Borgville, especially when she owns her house. Now why did she have to break into those places for a few dollars?"

"She didn't have to," Grandfather said. "And she didn't do it."

"She didn't? But she said—now look here!"

"I've been doing some checking, too," Grandfather said, "and I say your burglar wasn't Sally Carter."

"Then who was it?"

"A couple of weeks ago," Grandfather said, "you had Johnny drive Harold Grant home from Bailey's. Remember? Well, I had a talk with Sue Rollins. She thought it was the last straw when she saw a college boy bringing her no-good nephew home, and she told Harold she wouldn't give him another cent. But Harold couldn't do without his liquor, and he stole the money so he could go on drinking. Then he got wind of the trap you were setting, and that scared him enough to sober him up for a few days."

"I thought he was trying to reform to get Sally back," the sheriff said.

"Sally heard from his aunt what had happened," Grandfather went on. "She knew Harold was the burglar, and she was afraid he would try it again and get caught. So that Saturday night she went uptown to stop him before he got himself in trouble, and she got caught herself. Then Sue Rollins decided she'd rather have Harold drunk than in jail, and she gave him some money and chased him out of town until the trouble blew over."

There was a mild commotion across the street at Bailey's. Mr. Bailey escorted Harold Grant—already drunk at that time of morning—out the door and leaned him against a lamppost.

"I figured he'd stopped reforming because Sally got married," the sheriff said. "Johnny, why don't you drive Harold home?"

"Nope," I said. "That's how this mess got started."

The sheriff sat there for a while, scowling across the street at Harold Grant. "Look here," he said finally. "Do you mean to say Sally Carter was so worried about Harold she went chasing around in the dead of night to keep him out of trouble, and she took the blame for stealing that money when she knew Harold did it, and then when this Griswold guy asked her to marry him she jumped at it?"

"That's exactly what I mean to say," Grandfather said.

"I don't believe it."

"Don't, then," Grandfather said.

The sheriff scowled at Harold Grant again. "Women," he said, "are fickle."

"I suppose so," Grandfather said, "but so is everyone else." ●

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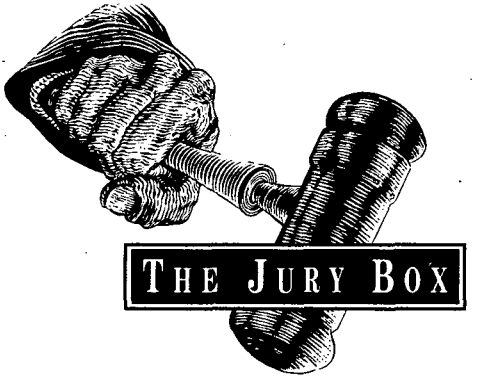

by Jon L. Breen

During a recent vacation, a fellow traveler from England passed along a paperback copy of Reginald Hill's *Killing the Lawyers* (published in the U.S. by St. Martin's in 1997). She didn't give it a high recommendation. Surely, she said, the Luton inhabited by black private eye Joe Sixsmith was some other Luton, for it couldn't be the one she knew. Reading the book, I realized her comments had been facetious, for the locale was clearly England and the likable hero a patriotic consumer of the "Full British Breakfast." Still, the novel had more of an American feel than Hill's longer established police series about Dalziel and Pascoe.

The American influence is felt even more strongly in the developing sub-genre known as Brit noir: hardboiled, violent, slangy, and very, very dark novels and stories from British writers more influenced by Jim Thompson, James Ellroy, and James M. Cain than by anybody named Agatha. Some representative examples are gathered in *Fresh Blood 2* (Do-Not Press/Dufour Editions, Chester Springs, PA 19425-0007; $16.95), edited by Mike Ripley and Maxim Jakubowski, one of whose contributors (with "Mother's Ruin," a grim look at parent-child relations) is Ken Bruen, one of the most talented new writers in the category.

**** Ken Bruen: *The Hackman Blues,* Do-Not/Dufour, $15.95. Narrator Tony Brady, a fiftyish gay manic depressive ex-con, is hired by a self-proclaimed Gene Hackman look-alike to find his wandering daughter. ("Find a white girl in Brixton. Piece of cake.") He turns the assignment into an elaborate kidnap scam. The collapse of the caper and the gradual erosion of Brady's mental and physical health are sharply and unsparingly observed. Bruen's ability to keep the reader's interest in an unsympathetic main character merits comparison to Thompson's *The Killer Inside Me.*

*** Ken Bruen: *Her Last Call to Louis MacNeice,* Serpent's Tail, 180 Varick St., 10th floor, New York, NY 10014; $11.99. Cooper,

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London bank-robber and repo man, comes under the spell of Cassie, an American *femme fatale* who turns him onto the works of MacNeice but can only be bad news. Low-life crooks with pervasive literary obsessions seem to me even more unlikely than the poetry-quoting Scotland Yard detectives of more traditional British fiction—so much for realism—but the punchy, slangy, jokey narrative, rich in allusion to British and American popular culture, achieves an almost hypnotic quality.

*** Graham Thomas: *Malice in Cornwall,* Ivy, $5.99. In one of those more traditional British mysteries, Scotland Yard's Chief Superintendent Erskine Powell (who may remind you of Colin Dexter's Morse) and Detective Sergeant William Black (a Lewis figure who quotes literature like a Michael Innes character) travel to Cornwall to investigate a weird beach apparition known as the Riddle of Penrick, which may be connected to the murder of a teenage girl thirty years before. A nicely done second entry in a series worth watching.

*** Ed Goldberg: *Dead Air,* Berkley, $5.99. New York stand-up-comic-turned-private-eye Lennie Schneider gives his culture-clashed view of Portland, Oregon, and its left-wing community, centered on KOOK-FM, a listener-supported radio station whose internal politics lead to murder. The travelogue mystery has much extraneous detail, plugs for book dealers, gratuitous cooking, the kind of self-indulgences some readers love and others tolerate in exchange for a good story, which this is. There's also a cat. (To his credit, Goldberg has publicly disowned the stupid cover blurb that proclaims him "Raymond Chandler if he was funny, Robert P. Parker if he was Jewish, John D. MacDonald if he was alive!")

** Orlando Outland: *Death Wore a Fabulous New Fragrance,* Berkley $5.99. Doan McCandler and Binky Van de Kamp, a male/female, gay/straight, drag/mufti sleuthing team return for their second case, investigating the murder-via-poisoned-perfume-sample of a closeted gay Hollywood star who, like many of the other characters, has an obvious real-life model. From the "what fun" school of whodunit best exemplified by the Thin Man movies, the novel goes from an unpromising start to a pretty good finish, highlighted by a satirical Academy Awards sequence. Best line in the book is a quote from Armistad Maupin about San Francisco: "in this town, the love that dare not speak its name never shuts up." (Who is the pseudonymous Outland? I don't know, but there *may* be a broad clue in both the text and the blurb.)

** Judy Fitzwater: *Dying to Get Published,* Fawcett Crest, $5.99. I had a hard time believing the idiotic action required of wannabe (or in the current euphemism pre-published) mystery novelist Jennifer Marsh to set the plot in motion: writing real threatening letters to a poisonous literary agent in the course of plotting her imaginary murder. Then again, how much rationality can you

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expect of a heroine who has conversations with her unconceived child? Enjoyable reading for writers hoping to break into the mystery field, which could be a big enough audience to insure a reasonable sale.

The Edgar winner for best novel of 1997 is now out in paperback: James Lee Burke's *Cimarron Rose* (Hyperion, $7.99), introducing Deaf Smith, Texas, lawyer Billy Bob Holland. There's no denying Burke's virtues, mainly his deft use of language and fine descriptive touches, but his reputation has been inflated beyond reason as evidenced by this book, which is a succession of confrontations and macho posturings. He's good, yes, but nowhere near writers like Sharyn McCrumb, Thomas H. Cook, Bill Pronzini, and Mary Willis Walker, to name just four. The winning novel was inferior to at least two of the other nominees, Pronzini's *A Wasteland of Strangers* (Walker) and Ian Rankin's fine Scottish police novel *Black and Blue* (St. Martin's), not to mention such unnominated titles as Donald E. Westlake's *The Ax* (Mysterious) or the late Kate Ross's *The Devil in Music* (Viking), both reviewed in this space last year. (Lest I seem to be dumping on the Edgar committee, their judgment, however mistaken in my view, was validated by the selectors of the Hammett Prize, who have made *Cimarron Rose* one of their nominees.)

Two of the most unusual novels in the Ellery Queen canon are available in new large-print editions from G.K. Hall & Co., P.O. Box 159, Thorndike, Maine 04986: 1943's madly comic *There Was an Old Woman* ($22.95) and 1964's mystical *And On the Eighth Day* ($21.95). Different as they are in theme and mood, both novels include the trademark Queen puzzle-spinning. No one in the history of detective fiction has surpassed the Queen team in that area—and very few have produced works of as great variety, ambition, and literary quality.

Thomas M. Disch's *The Dreams Our Stuff is Made Of: How Science Fiction Conquered the World* (Free Press, $25) is one of the most enlightening and enjoyable books about a popular fiction genre I've ever read. My excuse for recommending it in a mystery magazine? The convincing case Disch makes that Edgar Allan Poe was not only the inventor of the detective story but of science fiction as well.

Erratum: The well-known critic Marvin Lachman, who is virtually as encyclopedic on musical comedy as mystery fiction, corrects a misstatement in our July column. The author of the "Girl Hunt" Spillane parody in the film *The Band Wagon* (1953) was not the team of Betty Comden and Adolph Green but Alan Jay Lerner.

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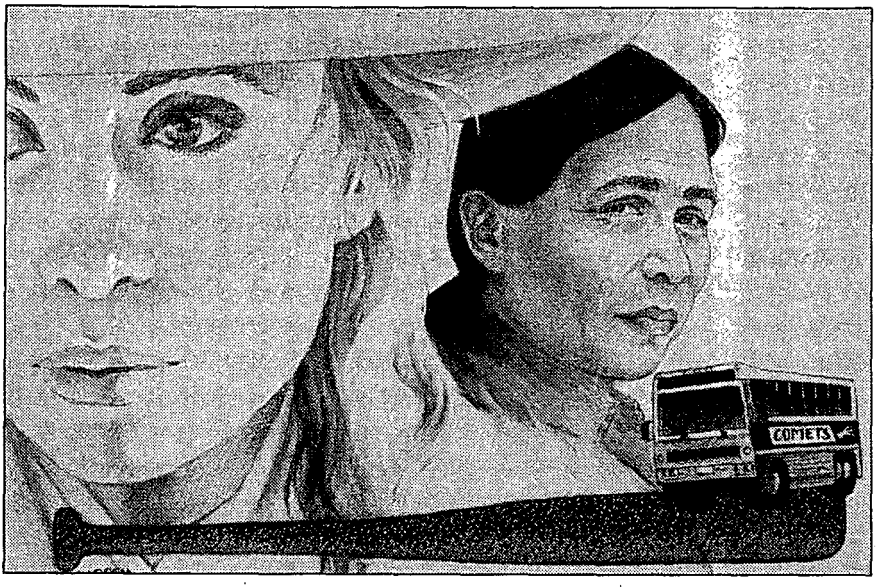

Art by Laurie Harden

A Busload of Bats

by Edward D. Hoch

Susan Holt's plane from New York landed in Phoenix at 5:45 and Mike Brentnor was there to meet her, having driven his rental car down from the bed-and-bath trade show in Las Vegas a few days earlier. Brentnor was tall and sandy-haired, a few years older than Susan but still in his early thirties. As a buyer for Mayfield's, Manhattan's largest and most prestigious department store, he often worked closely with Susan's promotions department.

"Right on time!" he greeted her, starting to give her a hug until her no-nonsense expression warned him off. "Long flight, huh? Tired out?"

"I'm just all business, Mike, as you know. Save your hugs for the secretaries in the office."

"Aw, Susan! Give a guy a break."

She ignored it and asked, "Have you been out to the training camp yet?"

He nodded as they headed out of the terminal toward his car. She was pulling along her small suitcase on wheels, compact enough to fit in the plane's overhead bin. "I drove out yesterday, after I checked in. Roitler wasn't around, though. He's the big cheese who has to approve any exclusive merchandising deals."

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"So what do we do now?"

"Get you settled in at the hotel. He's due back in the morning. They've got some nice-looking stuff and you've seen the logo. I think it'll take off."

"If the Tri-City Comets take off." The Comets were one of major league baseball's new expansion teams, just six weeks away from playing their first game. Mayfield's was hoping to land an exclusive contract to handle some of their newer items of merchandise in New York City.

On the drive into the city he said, "A lot of kids will want the jackets just because they're new. That red comet with the three gold stars is a winner. We should talk about it over dinner."

Congratulations to Edward D. Hoch, whose 1997 story "One Bag of Coconuts" (*EQMM*/ November), has just received a nomination for the prestigious Anthony Award for Best Short Story, to be given at the Bouchercon World Mystery Convention in October. This is Mr. Hoch's second Anthony nomination, and it is gratifying to see him thus honored in the twenty-fifth anniversary year of his unbroken streak of publication in *EQMM*.

Susan sighed, pushing back the wisp of hair that had a habit of falling over her face. "I think I'll eat in my room and turn in early. I'm still on Manhattan time." Then, trying to end on a friendlier note; she asked, "How was Vegas?"

"You know what those trade shows are like. Even the sight of models wrapped in bath towels can get boring after the first day. I did a little gambling to perk myself up."

"Win anything?"

"The first day. Lost most of it the second day."

He parked in the underground garage at their hotel near the state capitol. She checked in and agreed to meet him for breakfast at eight-thirty in the morning. "The spring-training camp at Bank One Ballpark is right downtown, only ten minutes away," he said, "but we should be there by ten."

"Bank One Ballpark?"

"The locals call it Bob."

Alone in her room, Susan sat by the telephone trying to think of someone she could call back in New York. Since her breakup with Russell there were only a few friends who might really care that she'd arrived safely. She called one of them and got an answering machine, hanging up without leaving a message. Could an evening with Mike Brentnor be any worse than this?

Yes, it could, she decided, and went to bed early.

Over breakfast he showed her the Comets' new gold-colored baseball cap with the Tri-City logo. "They're going to be wearing this at all Sun-

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day games, at home and on the road," he told her. "Later on they might adopt a whole different uniform for Sunday games."

Susan put the cap on Mike's head and studied the result. "The kids'll like them," she decided.

After breakfast they drove out to the training camp the team shared with two other teams. It was south of the Phoenix Civic Plaza, near the railroad tracks that bisected the central city, in a sun-baked area of old warehouses just now beginning to change from wasteland to wonderland. A new hotel and a science center had recently opened, Mike told her, along with a retail and restaurant complex with a twenty-four-screen movie theater.

"Their training camp isn't exactly off the beaten path."

"They have to go where the people are, even for non-season games. They're using the new stadium here. It's only been open a year."

Soon they came upon a sign that read: Bank One Ballpark: Winter Home of the Arizona Diamondbacks, the San Diego Padres and the Tri-City Comets. Rather than the small field she'd expected, there was a brick and glass stadium with large full-color, live-feed monitors and a metal retractable roof. The building blended into the area nicely, yet still presented a modern look. Mike pulled into one of the parking areas and they walked to the clubhouse entrance. Their meeting was with Larry Freedman, whom Susan instantly identified as an eastern jock gone to middle-aged flab. He and Mike had talked the previous day.

"It's a pleasure to meet you at last," he said, pulling out a chair for Susan. "We've accomplished a great deal by fax and phone but there's nothing like a face-to-face meeting."

"It must be very exciting to be in on the ground floor of a new major-league baseball team," she said with a smile.

"It is," Freedman answered, probably repeating something he'd said a hundred times before. "The Tri-City folks are great. They're big boosters of the team and they'll be packing our new stadium on opening day."

Mike Brentnor grinned. "All wearing your logo jackets and sweatshirts."

"You bet!"

Susan unzipped her briefcase. "Here are rough layouts of some of the newspaper ads our art department came up with, Mr. Freedman. As you can see, we'll rely heavily on our exclusive line of the higher-priced Tri-City merchandise."

"Did Mike show you the new Sunday cap?" he asked as he glanced over the layouts.

"He did."

"What do you think?"

"It might be more of a children's item, but that's not my decision."

Freedman lifted a warm-up jacket in the same gold color. "What about this?"

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"Nice!" Mike told him. "I have the contracts right here if you're ready to sign."

"This is for the exclusive deal?"

"Exclusive in New York City for two years, with an option to renew. We'll guarantee a major advertising campaign using print ads and TV spots."

Freedman picked up the contract, pretending to read it. "Mr. Roitler will have to approve this. He should be here momentarily."

As if on cue, the door opened and they were joined by a gray-haired man with a moustache to match. Hans Roitler, one of the owners of the Tri-City Comets, was a German-born businessman who'd been brought to America by his parents at the age of eight, just before World War II. He shook hands with Mike and Susan, listening intently while Mike outlined their marketing strategy.

"We've already settled most of the points," Mike told him. "It's just these new high-end items. We think Mayfield's could do very well with these if we had them on an exclusive basis for the first two years, with an option for more." He passed the contract over to the club owner. "Frankly, Mr. Roitler, we don't make much profit selling baseball caps. These higher-priced jackets are another matter entirely." Roitler took out a cigar but didn't light it. He pondered the contract at some length before saying, "A one-year exclusive and no option. That's the best I can do."

"Mr. Roitler—"

He held up a hand to end the discussion. "No, no. Who knows where the Comets will be a year from now? We may have won the World Series. Look at the Marlins. They won it in their fifth season."

Susan knew that Brentnor was pleased with even a one-year exclusive on the items, but he went through the motions before finally agreeing and passing his pen across the table for Hans Roitler's signature. "Let's get this wrapped up today. It's only six weeks till your opening game."

"My attorney will have to vet it first."

Susan could see the frustration on Mike's face. "We need to order the merchandise and—"

"All right. I'll have it faxed back East to him today. We should have his opinion by tomorrow. Can you both stay an extra day?"

"I think so," Susan answered for them.

Larry Freedman was all smiles. "I can show you around the training camp if you'd like. You can watch some batting practice."

Roitler snorted. "If the bats ever arrive."

"They're here, sir. They were delivered to the hotel where the team is staying by mistake and I'm having them sent out on the team bus."

"You had no bats?" Susan asked. "Doesn't everyone have his own?"

"The veteran players often do, but we need bats for practice and replacement when one breaks. We need them for the rookies and the

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pitchers too. A major league team can go through hundreds in one season. We ordered a gross of them in different sizes and weights."

While the owner went off to fax the contract to his attorney, Freedman took them into the big dome. "Of course, it's not as large as Toronto or Houston or our new stadium back home, but it holds forty-eight thousand people. It's got a retractable roof, air conditioning, and natural turf. There are picnic areas, a children's playground, and even a swimming pool behind the outfield fence. San Diego and Arizona are holding their spring training here, and, of course, our Comets. They have the training and exhibition schedules all worked out to accommodate three teams, and we expect big crowds." He smiled ruefully. "If we don't get 'em, we may be in the old minor-league ballpark for next spring's practice. We might be back there anyway if the Diamondbacks decide we're too disruptive to their own opening-day planning."

Susan watched the workmen repairing the natural turf along the dugouts. Suddenly the loudspeaker squawked and a harsh voice asked, "Larry, have you seen Willa around?"

Freedman lifted his head toward the announcer's booth. "She rode the bus into town to collect the bats, Chet. Anything I can do for you?"

"No, I was just looking for her."

He showed them the team locker rooms and then took them on the elevator to the top of the dome. "These are the sky boxes. There are around forty of them here and that's where the real money is, with corporations willing to pay extra for luxury. We have them in the new Comets stadium too." Susan had never been in a sky box before and she was intrigued that the bar and partying area seemed larger than the seating area for actually watching the game.

When they came back to ground level and went outside, Freedman glanced at his watch. "The bus should have been back by now. It's only ten minutes each way, plus time to load the bats. I hope the hotel didn't misplace them."

"Are they in boxes?" Mike asked.

Freedman nodded. "Usually a dozen to a box, though some suppliers pack differently. Willa doesn't have to lift them. She's our front-office manager, Willa Bright. She just went along to supervise and make sure the hotel people loaded all the boxes on the bus."

He pointed out the animated scoreboard that could show replays and crowd scenes as well as graphics, then took them back outside into the morning heat. "How long before Roitler hears back from his attorney?" Mike asked.

"Probably tomorrow morning. If we get an answer today I'll leave a message at your hotel. Meanwhile, take a look around Phoenix. There's a lot to see."

Mike and Susan headed back toward their hotel. "Do you think the lawyer will find some reason to change the contract?" she asked.

"I hope not. We've got little enough time now if we want the items on

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sale for opening day. I'll have to phone Saul." Saul Marx was their boss back in New York.

Susan was more practical. "So long as we have them by the time the Comets come to New York in June, there's no great harm done."

"I suppose not," he grudgingly agreed.

As they pulled out of the parking lot Susan noticed a large green bus at the entrance to another lot across the street. "What's that, Mike?"

"Looks like a bus."

They pulled up beside it and she saw the Comets logo on a large adhesive strip affixed to the side. "This must be the bus they've been waiting for. It may have broken down."

"I don't see any sign of an accident."

Susan got out and went up to the bus door, with Mike reluctantly following.

There was no driver visible and the doors were closed. Mike noticed the driver's window was open slightly and stood on tiptoe to reach through it. "Sometimes this works," he said, feeling around for the right lever to pull. There was a sudden whoosh of compressed air as the passenger door opened.

Susan led the way onto the bus, seeing the empty driver's seat with a pack of cigarettes and stack of hard-rock tapes next to the audio system. Long boxes of bats were piled in the aisle. One box had been opened, and she noticed that the bats were neatly packed, six in each direction.

Except that one was missing.

"My God, Mike!"

"What is it?"

Near the back of the bus, drooped across the seats with her bloodied head dangling in the aisle, was the body of a young woman.

Mike used the missing driver's cellular phone to call the police and then Susan notified Larry Freedman back at the training camp, using the number jotted down on the driver's pad. It took Freedman a moment to realize what she was saying. "A dead woman? Is it Willa?"

"I don't know. Woman in her twenties, short, with brown hair. Wearing a Comets T-shirt and jeans."

"It sounds like her. What happened?"

"Someone hit her with one of the bats. Possibly the driver, since he's not here."

"I'll come right down. Exactly where are you?"

"Not far. A parking lot across the street, near the brew pub."

A police car arrived as she finished talking, and another followed soon after. By the time Larry Freedman reached the scene, along with a man she didn't know, the bus had been searched and a crowd was gathering. Larry introduced his companion as Chet Elton, and as soon as she heard his deep voice she recognized it as the one that had called

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to Freedman over the stadium's loudspeaker. "Willa works for me in the front office," Elton explained. "What happened here?"

"If that's her on the bus, she's dead," Mike told him. "Killed with a baseball bat. No sign of the driver. Susan and I stopped when we saw the logo on the side of the bus. We knew you were waiting for your bats."

The detective investigating the case was named Cena. He gazed at Susan with dark Latin eyes and asked, "Did you know the victim?"

"No. Mike and I are here on business from New York. We never met her."

"She was killed with one of the baseball bats. Someone had to open a box and take it out."

Susan shrugged. "She might have done that herself, to make sure it was the correct shipment."

Detective Cena turned back to the others. "Where's the driver?"

Nobody knew. "This bus is used for intercity travel," Chet Elton observed. "Did you check the lavatory in back?"

"Empty," Cena said. "Can you give me the driver's name and address?"

"John Nez. He lives in the mobile-home park out at the Salt River Indian Community. I'd have to look up the actual address."

"You do that. We'll want to talk with him as soon as we can."

"Do you think he killed her?" Freedman asked.

"He's missing. That tells us something. And another thing bothers me too."

"What's that?"

"Like all intercity buses, this one has a large baggage compartment. It's empty."

"It wasn't needed. The bus had no passengers." Freedman showed his exasperation.

Detective Cena remained calm. "Exactly my point. If the baggage compartment was empty, why did they go to the trouble of loading twelve boxes of baseball bats onto the bus itself, in the aisles? Could that have been John Nez's idea, so he'd have a weapon available for the murder?"

Chet Elton was on his cell phone trying to reach Roitler, the team's owner. Police technicians were still taking photographs and measurements. Mike was standing by helplessly, talking in a low voice to Freedman, probably wondering if this event might somehow delay the signing of the contract. Susan decided they didn't need her anymore, and when Cena gave her permission to leave she asked Mike for the keys to the rental car.

"What for? Where you going?"

"I want to run back to the hotel for a bit. You should probably return to the stadium with these people anyway, to see if this will delay the

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contract. I'll pick you up there later, or you can get a cab back to the hotel."

He nodded absently, handing over the keys. "I'll take a cab. See you back there."

With a road map of Phoenix open on the seat beside her, Susan headed for the freeway that would carry her to the reservation just east of the city. The mobile-home park was shown on the map, and she had no trouble finding it. Hopefully she would arrive ahead of Cena's men.

A couple of Native American men were seated by one of the mobile homes as she drove up. "I'm looking for John Nez."

One of the men motioned down the street. "Last trailer on the left."

"Thanks."

She pulled up in front of the mobile home, already hearing the beat of rock music and remembering the tapes on the bus. There was a little black Toyota parked in the driveway but the music was coming from inside the home. A slender woman in her thirties came to the screen door when Susan rang the bell. "Is John Nez at home?" she asked.

The woman, whose features appeared more Mexican than Native American, eyed her suspiciously. "Are you from the Indian Agency? Is it about my Toyota?"

"No, I'm working over at the new ballpark." Not exactly a lie, she decided. "Are you Mrs. Nez?"

"That's me. Delores." She glanced back over her shoulder. "John's getting ready to leave, I don't know if he has time to talk."

"Where is he going?" Susan asked, but before the woman could answer a man appeared behind her.

"I'm John Nez. Who wants me?" There was no doubt that he was a Native American, with the weathered skin and chiseled features so familiar to Susan from the movies and television. He wore a workshirt and jeans that seemed about to burst.

"Susan Holt. There's been an accident with the bus you were hired to drive. The police will be here soon to question you."

"John, what's she talking about?" his wife asked.

"Be quiet, Delores. What do you want, Miss Holt?"

"Is there a place we can talk?"

"You can talk right here," the woman insisted.

Nez ignored her. "The park across the street," he suggested to Susan, motioning toward a little square of grass with a single bench and a few pieces of playground equipment. When they'd gone over there he asked, "What's this all about?"

"I think you know, Mr. Nez. A woman was killed on the bus you were driving. Willa Bright, the Comets' office manager. Don't pretend you weren't there. The police already think you killed her."

"You're a cop, aren't you?"

"No. I work for a department store back in New York. I just want to help get to the bottom of this so it doesn't interfere with a business deal."

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"Why do they think it was me?"

"Probably because you ran away from the scene."

"I didn't kill that woman."

"Then why did you run?"

He kicked at a loose stone by his feet. "Reservation folks don't get a fair shake from the law. They'd listen to my story and lock me up for life."

She stared into John Nez's sad brown eyes. "Why don't you try out the story on me? What happened on the bus?"

"I picked her up at the stadium this morning. We drove to the hotel and I waited while they loaded those bats. I guess the company got mixed up and sent them there instead of the stadium."

"Louisville Sluggers?"

"Nah, they were cheap bats from across the border. They don't use 'em in real games, just for practice."

"I never heard of such a thing!"

"All I know is what they tell me."

"The police think the loading of the bats onto the bus itself rather than in the baggage compartment might have been done to provide you with a handy weapon."

"No, no!" he insisted. "That's not what happened at all."

"Then tell me."

"She wanted the bats inside."

"Willa did?"

He nodded. "She told me she wanted to check them over to make sure they were the ones she'd ordered."

"The drive only takes about ten minutes. She couldn't wait that long?"

"You'd have to ask her."

"I can't. She's dead."

He thought about that for a moment and then started talking. "I couldn't see her. She was behind me in the back of the bus, opening one of the boxes. I was playing a loud tape and couldn't hear very well." Susan nodded, remembering the tapes of rock music. "I did hear a noise of some sort, maybe a bat dropping, and I looked around. I saw her body hanging over the seat and all that blood, and I pulled off the road into one of the empty parking lots by the stadium. I went back to look at her and she was dead. I don't know how it happened. Maybe I hit a bump and the bat—"

"That was no bump," Susan assured him. "She was deliberately hit with a bat, very hard. If you didn't do it, who did? Who else was on the bus with you?"

He moistened his lips with a nervous tongue. "No one. There was just the two of us. I swear!"

"Could one of the people from the hotel have stayed on the bus after they got the bats loaded?"

Nez shook his head. "I sat there in the driver's seat the whole time.

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Two of the bellmen loaded the boxes while Willa supervised. I saw them both get off."

"All right. What did you do after she was killed?"

"I ran away," he admitted. "I got off the bus and started running. I cut through the Civic Plaza and found a taxi to bring me home. I knew the city cops and the tribal police would be after me."

"A taxi? Where was your car?"

"It's not running. The company lets me drive the bus home at night till I get it fixed."

"Do you have a police record, John?"

"Little things, way back. Drugs, mostly. But I didn't want to be arrested again."

His story was so unbelievable that she believed it. Any killer could make up a better story than that. "Take my advice and wait for the police to come, John. Anyone can understand panic. If you run away now they'll come after you, convinced you're the killer. When they find you, out there in the desert or wherever, they might shoot first."

Perhaps he might have agreed to her suggestion. She never had an opportunity to find out. A tribal-police car came into view, traveling fast. A Phoenix police car was right behind it in a cloud of dust. John Nez's options had run out.

Mike Brentnor was angry. Pacing back and forth across the hotel room, he directed his fury at Susan. "Damn it, you can't keep doing this, meddling in police work all the time! Mayfield's will have you out on the street, and I'll be right behind you!"

"They've never complained before," she murmured.

"Well, they're complaining now. Saul Marx is furious at both of us. The police think you were encouraging John Nez to run away, and Roitler has put the entire contract matter aside till this is resolved."

It was early evening and they were at the hotel, following hours of police questioning and phone calls back to New York. Nez was in jail, held on suspicion of murder, though he hadn't yet been formally charged. "What motive did he have for killing her?" Susan wanted to know. "The police say she wasn't sexually assaulted."

"But he admitted to you that he was alone on the bus with her. Who else could have done it?"

Susan didn't answer. Instead she asked, "Just what did Roitler say about the merchandising contract?"

"That he was too upset to go into that now. Apparently he was very close to Willa Bright and her death was quite a blow to him."

"I have to get back there in the morning," she said.

"Right now, I don't think they want to see either of us."

But by morning things had changed again. Susan was awakened at seven-thirty by the buzzing of the telephone next to her bed. "Hello?" she answered sleepily, about to be angry with Mike for awakening her.

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"Miss Holt, this is Larry Freedman at the ballpark. Sorry to bother you so early."

She was instantly awake. "That's all right, Mr. Freedman. What's up?"

"Mr. Roitler has heard from his attorney back East. He just called to give his approval to the contract."

"That's good news. I was afraid things might be delayed."

"Mr. Roitler would like to see you before he signs. Without Mike Brentnor, if that's possible."

"Certainly."

"Could you come over now? You can have breakfast here if you haven't eaten yet."

"I'll be there in a half-hour," she promised and hung up. She knew it would mean more trouble with Mike, but she had little choice.

Freedman escorted her to the office Hans Roitler was using during spring training, then left them alone. The team owner waved his hand. "Isn't this luxurious, Miss Holt? My office back home at the Comets' new stadium won't be nearly so plush."

"It's very nice," she agreed. After a few words of regret about the previous day's tragedy, she got right to business. "I understand your attorney has approved our contract calling for exclusive New York City rights to the merchandise we listed."

He nodded. "With the proviso it be limited to one year, with any additional periods to be negotiated. Here, they drew up this revised contract and faxed it to me. There are two copies."

This was where it got awkward. She skimmed through the words without really seeing them and finally said, "Mike Brentnor is the one who'd have to sign this for the store. I'm just along to handle the promotional aspects."

"That's why I wanted to speak to you alone, Miss Holt, to discuss our joint interest in promotion, though I'll tell you that in any case I always prefer dealing with an attractive young woman. You must realize that anything which reflects badly on the Tri-City Comets is certain to hurt sales of our merchandise, in Mayfield's and every other store."

"Of course."

"I understand that when the police went to that bus driver's trailer on the reservation yesterday, they found you with him."

"We were talking, yes."

"About what, may I ask?"

"About the killing of your office manager. I've had some success helping the police in the past. I thought I might lend a hand."

"I believe Detective Cena is in charge of the investigation."

"He used some bad reasoning yesterday in casting suspicion on John Nez, the bus driver. Because the boxes of bats were stored inside the bus rather than in the baggage compartment, he thought it meant that Nez had wanted a weapon handy to kill Willa. But if he'd planned to

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kill her he certainly would have brought a weapon with him. He wouldn't have found it necessary to load twelve heavy boxes of baseball bats into the bus so he could use one of them. When I asked Nez about it, he told me it was Willa who'd wanted the boxes inside the bus so she could check the order. He also told me the bats were cheap ones from across the border."

"What does that prove?"

"Nothing in itself, but I'd like to examine them."

"Do you really think we're smuggling cocaine or something inside baseball bats?"

Susan smiled. "I know it sounds ridiculous, but I do read occasional stories of players corking their bats to add distance to their hits. If a cylinder of cork can be inserted into a bat, I suppose something else could too."

"Need I remind you once again that anything hurting the Comets hurts Mayfield's as well?"

Susan folded the revised contract and put it in her purse. "I'll show this to Mike. But there's no way we can be part of a cover-up, especially since an innocent man could be charged with a crime he didn't commit."

"Don't be too certain of John Nez's innocence," Roitler said. "He may not have told you that he was having an extra-marital affair with the victim."

"With Willa Bright?" She knew the surprise showed on her face. "But the team just arrived here."

"Willa was part of the advance guard. She'd been here for three weeks, making arrangements for everything, including the team bus to run between the hotel and the stadium. She's the one who hired Nez."

"And you think he killed her?"

"It may have been a lovers' quarrel. Let it go at that, Miss Holt."

She left the office not knowing what to think. The stadium roof was open to the morning sun and she paused for a few minutes, watching some players tossing a ball back and forth. Another was swinging a bat. On the plane out from New York she'd read newspaper accounts of the new expansion teams. She knew they liked to build their stadiums downtown rather than on the outskirts of a city, to make a trip to the game an event which could include dinner before and a drink after. It brought new business to the entire area. The expansion teams acquired their players by first hiring some free-agent amateurs and then picking from a special expansion-team pro draft. After a few trades with existing teams, they were ready for spring training, where the final choices would be made. Then it was on to opening day.

She realized with a jolt that she had the power to change that scenario for the Tri-City Comets.

Back at the hotel Susan found Mike Brentnor pacing the lobby waiting for her. "Where've you been, for God's sake? When I saw the car was missing I figured you'd gone off someplace."

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She told him where she'd been and what Hans Roitler had to say about her activities. "He really didn't like me going out to the reservation to talk with that bus driver. I think he's hiding something, Mike. He takes the position that what's bad for the Comets is bad for Mayfield's."

"Well, he's right in a sense. The whole deal depends on the success of his new team."

She handed over the contract Roitler had signed. "Then you'd better sign this."

"You've got it! Good!" He started reading through it for the changes.

"I'll see you later."

"Now where are you going? We should get an afternoon plane back to New York."

"There's something I have to do first."

She didn't tell him that she was on her way to see Detective Cena. The Police and Public Safety Building was on South Third Street and she drove directly there.

Cena didn't seem surprised to see her. "You have something to add to yesterday's statement, Miss Holt."

"I have. Are those bats still here?"

"The bus was towed in as evidence, along with the bats. We'd planned on returning them to the team today, all but the murder weapon."

"You'd better look inside one of them. Cut it open, or whatever you have to do."

Cena allowed himself a slight smile. "We've already done that, miss. My men X-rayed one and it looked suspicious."

"Cocaine?"

He shook his head. "Anabolic steroids, the sort sometimes used by athletes. Only this is a new stronger type being made in Latin America. They're illegal in this country. I believe Mr. Roitler wanted to ensure a winning team in his first year. We're checking to see what laws were violated. Now tell me what you know about all this."

Susan took a deep breath and told him.

There was no rock music playing at John Nez's mobile home this time. Though the Toyota was still in the driveway and Nez had been let out on bail, she knew he wasn't home. His wife came to the door and confirmed it. "The police came for him a few minutes ago. They want to question him further. Something about those bats."

"Can I come in, Mrs. Nez."

"Sure!" She held open the screen door and Susan entered. "The place is a mess. I've got to get some cleaning done."

Susan took a seat. "Your husband is in trouble," she began at once. "The police have found illegal steroids inside those bats, apparently smuggled across the border."

The news seemed to surprise her. "He wasn't involved in anything like that, was he?"

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"They're not sure. Since Willa Bright wanted the bats inside the bus so she could check them, it seems likely that she knew. One problem is that the way your husband tells it, only he could have killed her. He insists he was alone on the bus with her when it happened. That's why he panicked and ran away."

"Do you believe that?"

Susan looked into the woman's eyes. "No, I don't. They say he was having an affair with her, one that started some weeks back when she rented the team bus and got him as a driver." Delores Nez's expression never changed. "If he'd planned to kill her, he'd have had some other weapon with him. And I don't see it as a spur-of-the-moment thing. I think someone else did it."

"Without John seeing or hearing them?"

"He was driving the bus, playing loud rock music, and there is one place where the killer could have hidden."

"Where's that?"

"In the lavatory at the back of the bus. The killer emerged, picked up one of the bats, hit Willa Bright with it, and returned to the hiding place. When the police searched, it was empty. But of course the killer would have left the bus right after your husband."

Delores Nez smiled slightly. "You're forgetting one thing. The killer had no opportunity to board the bus in the first place. John would never have left his bus unguarded. And if he did, Willa would have been there."

"Exactly," Susan agreed. "The killer had no opportunity to board the bus and hide in the lavatory, once he began the trip. The killer had to hide there before the trip began."

"That shows how wrong you are! He didn't pick up the bus at the garage. It was parked in our driveway overnight."

"I know that," said Susan quietly. "He told me earlier."

"So no one could have hidden in it before he drove to the stadium to pick up that woman."

"You could have, Delores. You could have slipped onto the bus just before he left."

"Why would I do that?"

"To catch Willa and your husband together, to confirm what you already suspected. After you heard them talking, after John turned up the music, you came out of the lavatory, picked up one of the bats, and hit her while she checked them over. You killed her, Delores, and hid in the lavatory until John left the bus. Then you made your own escape and took a cab right home, arriving here just before he did."

"I'd have been a fool to do that," she argued. "For all I know, he might have driven the bus to the police station instead of abandoning it."

"You were married to him. You knew about his past record. It was a good guess that he'd run. Besides, you hadn't planned to kill her until you heard them talking. Isn't that true?"

There was a moment's silence and then she spoke up angrily. "I

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hadn't planned it but I'm glad I killed her! She came here for a few weeks and stole my husband away. John was a good man until she came to town. She didn't care about him, not really. She'd be back home in April. He was only another conquest, and I couldn't let that happen. We may live out here in a trailer, but I don't let women like her treat me like dirt!"

"You have to tell the police, Delores."

She snorted at that. "Police? You think they can prove anything? There's no evidence against me."

"They'll find the cab that picked you up and brought you back here."

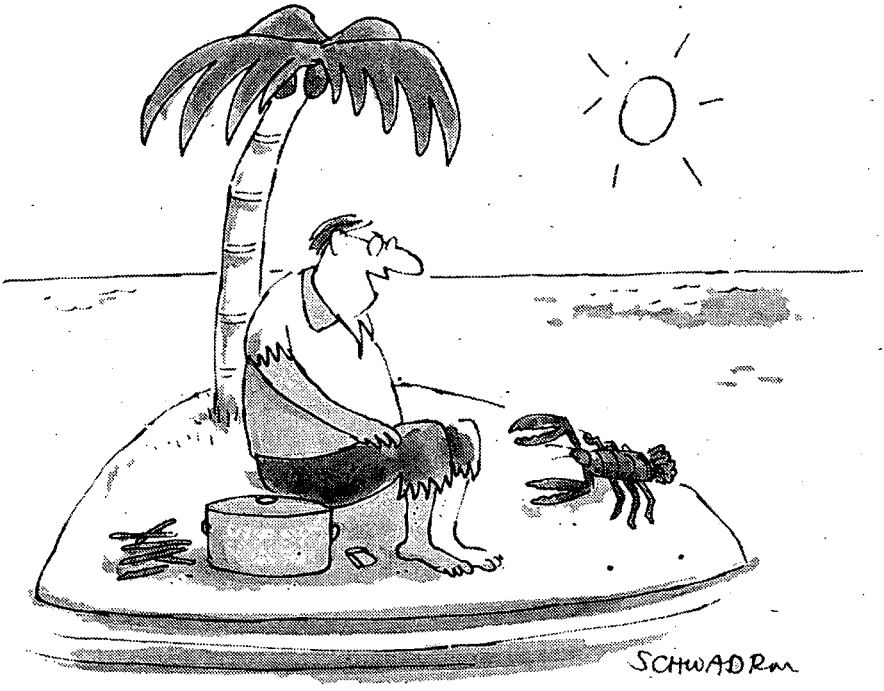
"That proves nothing."

Then Susan told her. "You know why the police took your husband away just before I arrived, Delores? It was so he wouldn't be playing his loud rock music. It was so this wire I'm wearing could pick up every word you said."

She dove for Susan in a sudden blind fury. If there'd been a baseball bat handy she'd have swung it before Detective Cena ever got through the door. As it was, he had to yank her off Susan and quickly handcuff her.

The Mayfield's contract was never signed. Hans Roitler was too busy trying to explain the smuggled steroids to the authorities, the baseball commissioner, and the press. Mike and Susan flew back to an unhappy Saul Marx.

Six weeks later the Tri-City Comets lost their opening game. ●



"Well, well, well! I guess it's just you, me, this pot of water, these twigs, and a book of matches on this island."

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BLOOD GROWS OLD

by William Bankier

EQMM has just learned of a collection of Bankier stories on audiocassette that may be of interest to readers. Produced by writer Peter Sellers through Tangled Web Audio, in 1996, the collection is entitled *The Last Act is Deadly and Other Stories*. Here is Mr. Bankier with a brand new tale, something a little different this time.

I was a child and she was a child. Never mind that Annabel Liebling was twenty-three years old and had been away to college. While I, Corey Harwood, was almost twenty-four that golden summer in Los Angeles. We loved each other and could see nothing in our rosy view of the future that might harm us.

"I think we should go," Annabel said. She was holding Conrad Selinger's brief letter of invitation, reading it a second time. "I know we don't like Mr. Selinger, but this is a chance to go aboard Milo Tarn's yacht."

"Do you believe what he says about the movie scripts?"

"I saw something about it on TV. You could make very good money."

I took the letter back from her. We were sprawled on my bed in the house in Pacific Palisades. We were alone; my mother was out somewhere showing a ranch-style bungalow and my father was in Santa Monica at the cable-TV studio taping next week's program with his five-piece jazz band. There was nothing going on just then between myself and Annabel. We had been friends since childhood, growing up on the same street. And there had been physical intimacy between us during our teen years. But now, since she had come home with her degree from Ohio State, I can only say we loved with a love that was more than love.

I stared for the umpteenth time at Conrad Selinger's cramped handwriting. The sentences were like tracks left by insects feeding off something on the page. Did his published poems look like this when he composed them? I read aloud.

" 'Apart from enjoying the famous Tarn hospitality, you will be in a position to do yourself some good. Milo buys screenplays from aspiring writers for a few thousand dollars. He turns these over to a couple of pros and pays them bigger money to perform what is called script development. The movies are never produced; his accountants write off

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the expense as a loss against taxable income. We can probably wrangle you one of these assignments.' "

I dropped the letter on the floor. "I've never even seen a screenplay. I suppose I could try if he'll let me."

Annabel's cheek was balanced on the palm of her hand. Her pale hair fell in waves that touched the quilted spread. She looked more ethereal today than usual. My Annabel seems to inhabit a region between this world and the next.

"Conrad Selinger will be there," I went on. "I've never been able to swallow what he said about my poetry."

My mother, the aggressive and powerful real estate agent, had searched out a magnificent house in the Hollywood Hills which the prize-winning poet now occupies. Forever grateful, Selinger listened when Esther Harwood told him her son wrote verse and would welcome his opinion and advice. I sent him several of my best pieces and, a week later, drove up Laurel Canyon to retrieve my work and to hear what the great man had to say. Annabel accompanied me.

"You can turn it out," Selinger conceded on that sunbaked afternoon as we sat with drinks on his patio looking out over the smoggy landscape of the San Fernando Valley. I recall his exact words. He seemed to be watching Annabel most of the time. "But there is nothing behind the lines. You are facile, but without substance. Your verses—I can't call them poetry—are like the babbling of a clever drunk at a party."

In the car on the way home, Annabel tried to penetrate my angry silence. "Your poetry is beautiful," she said. "What does Selinger know? He's an old man. He's jealous. He wants to hurt you." She put a hand on my knee. "He wishes he had what you have."

"You're right about that," I said. "He wishes he had you."

The thrust of Selinger's criticism, its power to hurt me, lay in my belief that it was true. I write poetry because it is an easy thing to do. All my life, I have followed the path of least resistance. My parents are guilty of indulging me. When I completed high school, I told them I did not want to go on to university. "I've had enough classrooms," I said. My father, the effervescent Tommy Harwood, went right along.

"You have to do what feels right," he said. "It worked for me."

A self-taught alto saxophone player and engaging singer of scat vocals, Tommy Harwood was earning a living with a name band before he was twenty. Today, when many of his colleagues from the swing era are dead or tending bar, his versatile group is busy fifty weeks a year playing weddings, bar mitzvahs, and graduations. The weekly half-hour on cable provides all the publicity the band needs. I watch the show with a mixture of pride, envy, and embarrassment. Is that really my old man up there, the energetic geezer with the grey crewcut, singing:

"She's sore, she locked the door!
No more toujours l'amour . . ."

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As for me, I began working for my mother part-time at the real estate office. I answered telephones. I typed out descriptions of desirable property. Sometimes I drove to a location with a wooden For Sale sign on a sharpened post and hammered it into a more-or-less upright position on the front lawn.

Over time, my presence in the office dwindled as I began filling notebooks with what I called my work. And since the poet's life demands introspection, I was free to spend a lot of time on a bench at the mall, observing the comings and goings of my fellow man.

The visit to Conrad Selinger's hilltop estate seemed like a turning point. I saw a crossroads ahead of me. One way was a continuation of the route I had been following. The other turned a corner towards an unidentified destination.

Annabel reassured me. "I'll be with you," she said. "We'll see the inside of Mr. Tarn's yacht. There'll be important people." She seemed excited. "What should I wear?"

The marina looked menacing to me with its forest of masts in subtle motion. It gave me an uneasy sense of Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane. Or perhaps it was my awareness of the money it took to moor these boats here. And my fear of the people who could spend it.

Annabel was breathtaking in a diaphanous sea-green gown that flashed like surf around her silver sandals. I turned over my car to one of a squad of valet-parkers who vanished with the vehicle, leaving us to contemplate the beckoning gangway and the sounds of revelry beyond.

Our host, I knew—and this was the extent of my information—was a movie mogul who had made billions as a computer software entrepreneur. I was surprised to discover how young he was. People talk about computer nerds, but our host was no gauche fumbler with a pocket full of pens. Dressed in an elegant white suit, tanned face crowned with close-cropped platinum hair, he looked more like one of the muscular beach boys to be seen roller-blading on Venice pavements.

"Milo Tarn, meet Corey Harwood and his very lovely friend, Annabel Liebling." Conrad Selinger had captured us upon our entry into the mahogany salon and seemed interested in claiming us as his own. "Corey, as I told you, is a rather capable writer. He's eager to try his hand at one of those scripts you keep acquiring."

It occurred to me that Selinger was mending fences because he realized my mother might be the one to find a buyer for his house, should he decide to sell it. "I'm no screenwriter," I confessed. "But I'm willing to learn."

"Tell the truth, Corey." Annabel had accepted a glass of white wine and as she held it now, she resembled an illustration from a fashion magazine. "Your writing is original and powerful."

Milo Tarn's face registered approval. "Modesty and loyalty," he said. "Two rare commodities in Tinseltown. Corey, you and I will talk later. Let me steal your Annabel and show her off to a few of my jaded

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acquaintances." With that, he took her hand as if it were intermission at the school dance and guided her to another corner of the room.

"Having fun yet?" Selinger asked. His eyes above the rim of his martini glass were all innocence.

I could not fault the party. A buffet table, hot and cold, was kept perpetually restored. My drink was renewed constantly by an obsequious waiter. Annabel was in her element. Tarn's attention soon was diverted onto other guests and she was deflected back to my side.

"Isn't he nice? You can't be worried any longer."

"I am feeling no pain," I said, enunciating carefully.

"Has Milo talked to you about scripts?"

"Milo has winked and waved from various distances," I said.

"Follow it up! You can't sit back and wait for things to happen. He opened the door, Corey. Now it's up to you."

"I hate it when you tell me the truth."

As the evening wore on, our host took up a position somewhat above the assembly. There was a large, square leather chair on a two-step riser at one end of the room. Tarn sat there with a bubble-glass of brandy like a chalice in his hand. As if to emphasize his preeminence, the guests settled on the carpeted floor or on lower chairs and stools.

"Forgive me," the billionaire said. "I am feeling all-powerful tonight. World sales of my software programs are eighteen percent over last year. Next year looks even better."

A murmur of appreciation arose from the common people.

"My feeling is that this corner of America is my kingdom. One day, the Pacific Rim will be my empire."

"Richly deserved," Conrad Selinger croaked like some ancient bird at the edge of the great man's chair. "And more power to your elbow."

While the guests were applauding, Selinger drew close to Tarn and whispered beside his ear. No doubt he was offering a suggestion because our host next turned his attention to myself and Annabel.

"Dear Ms. Liebling," he said, "you have been clinging to that lucky man of yours all evening. Tear yourself away now and come and sit by me."

Amused faces turned my way, including Annabel's. She was pleased to be singled out and, since nobody can predict the future, I could see nothing wrong in Tarn's command. But I shall never forgive myself for what I whispered to her as she hesitated. "He is opening the door. Now it's up to you."

Annabel made her way through the pattern of reclining people and sat where she was told, on the top step beside Tarn's throne, where he could place one hand upon her head as if it were the golden orb of state.

"I am impoverished," he pronounced, "by comparison with our young friend Harwood. My name heads the list in *Fortune*'s five-hundred. But my wealth is as nothing next to his. Because Annabel has blessed Corey with her love." He drank deeply from the brandy glass. "How I covet their relationship."

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There was music for dancing, but nobody danced. A wind from the sea blew up and the yacht rocked gently though we remained tethered in our mooring. Various couples wandered from the salon in amorous embrace, to return later looking disheveled and self-satisfied.

I lost track of time. It must have been past midnight when I went to stand on deck. The sky above the cluster of masts was powdered with stars. I inhaled sea air tainted with such smells as varnish and diesel fuel. Annabel came to me in mock distress.

"Here you are. I thought I'd been abandoned."

"Just filling my lungs."

"I imagined you'd gone without me."

"You'd be in good hands."

"What am I supposed to do, Corey? He can lift your career."

"I could put you on the street," I said to myself, surprised at the depth of my hostility, "and sell you to the highest bidder."

"Conrad is evil," she complained.

"Tell me something I don't know."

"He's always whispering. To Milo and then to me. He said, 'Mr. Tarn will be good to you. Not just tonight. And there'll be huge success in it for Corey.' "

"Two things, Annabel," I said. "You must do what you think is right. And I must come of age."

Better advice will never be offered me by anyone. I was a child and she was a child. But it seems that Fate wanted us to be children for only a few more hours. Sadly, the transition to adulthood does not occur without pain. I carried my misery to a recliner on the afterdeck. Here I tucked myself up under a blanket and fell asleep. Tomorrow, the sun would rise. So would I, God willing.

Conrad Selinger stood on an upper deck and watched the last car depart the marina. Now there was nobody aboard but himself, the young couple, and Milo Tarn. From his vantage point, he had a view of the afterdeck where Corey Harwood lay fast asleep under a blanket in a recliner chair. It was perfect.

The old poet was not without self-awareness. He knew that his motivation in bringing Annabel Liebling to Milo's attention was base. It could lead to only one thing. He also realized that, left to themselves, these children (who were so obviously and completely in love) would have fled the yacht before midnight. But he was careful not to leave them to themselves.

Corey was easy. He carried a heavy load of respect for the elderly—a grave weakness. It had allowed Selinger to insult his writing without taking a retaliatory punch on the nose. Was the boy truly as worthless a poet as the old man suggested? He realized that much of his own work

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was vulnerable to criticism. At times, feeling down, he scorned it himself.

Never mind. There was real life in play here tonight, not some transparent fantasy of words on a page. Some day, having robbed the young man of his most treasured possession, Selinger would find a way of making recompense.

He turned and walked across the deck to the outside companionway beside the private cabins. Behind the farthest mahogany door lay the stateroom of Milo Tarn. Selinger stood with arms folded, sucking a mint from the supply he always carried in a pocket of his sharkskin jacket. On his left ran a low brass railing and, twenty feet below, the dark, roiling water of the harbor.

The girl had been more difficult than her companion. She recoiled when he suggested what she must do.

"That's not possible."

"Your response does you credit. It's part of the reason why Milo is so smitten with you."

"I like him, too. But . . ."

"But what? You've seen what a gentle man he is. Time spent with him will be blissful."

"Corey would never get over it."

"Not true. He's sleeping right now on the afterdeck. When I woke him to tell him Milo was asking for you, your man's response was, 'Wake me when it's over.' "

"Did he really say that?"

"Why would I lie?" Selinger loved this answer. He used it all the time. The reasons why he would lie were obvious but nobody ever mentioned them.

She stood beside him, looking down on her lover asleep in his chair. His repose seemed to validate the old man's statement.

She shivered when she turned away, her eyes gleaming with a strange, ambiguous light. Selinger slipped out of his coat and draped it across her shoulders. With this buffer between them, he was able to put his hands on her and guide her down the companionway to the dark mahogany door.

It was almost day, Selinger was fighting sleep, when the door opened and Annabel Liebling slipped outside. A wave of warmth and a subtle fragrance emerged with her, filling the old man with envy and desire.

"Was that so bad?" he whispered.

"Have you been here all this time?"

"You look different. Older."

"I want to go home."

"Corey is still sleeping. Let him sleep."

"Allow me past, please. I'll wake him."

"He could use another friend. Milo Tarn has money. He may send a script Corey's way. Or he may forget. But I have connections in publishing."

"What do you want from me?"

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"You know what I want. I want some of what you bestowed upon our host."

"You must be out of your mind." She tried to push past him. He seized her by the shoulders.

"Don't be so proud. What's another slice off the loaf?"

Annabel stepped back and put all ten fingertips to her mouth. Her eyes became round with surprise and delight. "What? You said what?"

"You heard me." Selinger was confused by her response.

She began to laugh. "That's such a hokey old expression. Did you get that from your grandmother?" She was laughing as if she would never stop. "I can't wait to tell Corey you said that. I can't wait to tell everybody!"

"Stop it! Be quiet!" He shook her to make her stop laughing. But she didn't stop. She had lost control. He kept on shaking. The coat slipped off her shoulders and she collapsed against the railing. She went to her knees. Her face struck the polished brass and blood gushed from her nostrils. She gasped and remained bent over with her head down, drops of blood falling in a steady flow.

"I'm sorry. . . ." Selinger reached for her.

"Don't touch me!" She jerked herself away, tried to stand up, lost her balance, and tumbled over the railing, falling into deep water between Tarn's boat and the one moored next to it. She seemed to vanish without a struggle. The old man peered over the rail, looking for some sign of her. But although the eastern sky was now pale grey, the space far down between the boats was dark. He listened; there was no sound but the normal susurration of small waves against the hull.

The sad truth was clear in the poet's mind. He wanted her dead. She was going to make him a laughingstock. No question, she had said as much. Bad enough to be spurned for the undesirable old man he knew himself to be. But to be ridiculed in the community . . .

When it was clear that Annabel had drowned, Selinger took out a broad handkerchief and wiped away every trace of blood from the railing and the deck beneath. Then he folded the material carefully, stained side in, and replaced it in his pocket. Now he ran to Milo Tarn's door and began to hammer on the panel. "Come quickly! She's fallen overboard!"

I awoke to the sound of running. There was some light in the sky. Crew members were bending over the side, probing with long poles. I sat up and felt a surge of sick headache. Last night's excess of alcohol had not worked its way through my system.

Tarn and Selinger, the latter fully dressed, the former wearing a maroon robe, were on the upper deck. I made my way to their side. "What's happening?"

They seemed loath to reply. At last Tarn said, "Tell him, Conrad."

"Your girlfriend fell overboard. I'm afraid she's gone."

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"Oh God!" I sat down on the deck to keep myself from collapsing. "How?"

Selinger said, "I was on the deck below. I saw her come out of Milo's cabin. The companionway is narrow. Maybe it was the effect of changing from light to darkness. She lost her balance and fell over." He stared down at me, his face a mask of agony. "I'm sorry. I can't swim."

"I'd better call the police," Milo said. He went back to his cabin.

I am embarrassed to admit that, by the time the police had come and gone, I was feeling hungry. Much had happened. A detective listened to the stories of all three of us. He made some notes. Meanwhile, officers in a skiff rowed along the channel, dragging with grappling hooks. Two men in wet suits wearing equipment went below with lights. They found Annabel's body fifty yards away, lodged against the propeller of a neighboring boat. Identification was required. We walked to where she lay on the wooden pier. An officer drew back the yellow tarp and I knelt beside her.

She could have been asleep, her face almost serene, damp hair clinging to the pale forehead. "Her nose is swollen," I pointed out.

"She must have struck against something when she fell," Selinger said.

The detective glanced at us in turn, then drew the cover back in place. "Please don't leave town without letting me know. I'll want to talk to you again."

By now, the sun was high. We went back aboard and took refuge in the air-conditioned salon. Tarn buzzed the kitchen and ordered coffee and sandwiches. "Life goes on," he said sheepishly. Then he came and sat beside me. "You must hate me."

"I'm not sure how I feel about anybody right now," I said.

The food came. We drank a lot of coffee. Then Milo decided we were in need of something stronger. Nobody objected when he brought out a bottle of Courvoisier. Nor did we complain when he filled the glasses a second time, and then a third.

We talked more easily then. It was a wake for my Annabel, conducted a little closer than usual to the time of death. Conrad Selinger's face was flushed, an effect of the cognac and, I presumed, his emotions.

"This is a tragedy of poetic dimensions," he said. "I, for one, am struck by the resemblance to the poem 'Annabel Lee' by Edgar Allan Poe. Her name was Annabel Liebling—not so different. And this is your kingdom by the sea, Milo. You said that yourself last night. And you certainly loved her, Corey. And once Milo saw her, he loved her, too."

We looked at each other, the movie mogul and I, and when I saw the genuine pain in his eyes, I decided not to hate him.

The old poet was going on, his mind awash in alcohol and sentiment. "I've always wished I could handle language one tenth as brilliantly as Poe did." He closed his eyes and began to recite:

> "And so all the night-tide, I lie down by the side
> Of my darling, my darling, my life and my bride,
> In the sepulchre there by the sea.
> In her tomb by the sounding sea."

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I could not help myself. The events of last night and this morning crashed over me with such force that I buried my face in my hands and wept copious tears.

Selinger opened his eyes and saw the effect upon me of his recitation. "Forgive me. It was the last thing you needed to hear." He took from his pocket a folded handkerchief and handed it to me. "Here, dry your eyes."

"Thank you." I used the handkerchief to wipe my cheeks. I unfolded it to wipe again. That was when we saw the bloodstains. They were many and they were fresh.

Tarn took the cloth from me. "What's this, Conrad?"

"That? I forgot all about that." He was confused, at a loss for words. "Wait. Yes. Now I remember. I cut myself shaving."

"This looks more like you cut your throat."

"I don't see any razor cuts on your face," I said.

Tarn's voice was soft. "Did you hit her, Conrad?"

"No. I never touched her."

"You were outside the door, weren't you, when she left my cabin."

"I saw her come out. But I didn't touch her."

"Don't ask him anything else," I said. But Milo went on.

"You came on to her, didn't you? She told you to get lost and you struck her. That's when she fell."

"It was nothing like that." The old man seemed to have become half his size, shriveled inside his clothes. "Nothing like that."

"We need the police back here," Tarn said. He reached for the telephone.

They questioned Conrad Selinger. Eventually, he made a statement. A trial took place; he was convicted of second-degree manslaughter and sent to prison. I lived on alone, blaming myself for the tragedy. Had I drunk less and remained awake, Annabel would still be alive.

I am older now. I don't live in Los Angeles anymore. My parents have passed away. Milo gave me a chance at one of his movie scripts and I did quite well at it. Made a few dollars.

But my success came when I wrote a screenplay of my own. It was produced in New York. I came east that year and have stayed ever since.

I have a reputation here among friends and colleagues as a cynical man. You can understand, it is a facade. Beneath the tough exterior beats the heart of a sensitive, idealistic boy. A telltale heart, if they only knew.

And every now and then, when I am drinking alone late at night in my favorite bar on 47th Street, my mind flashes back to the golden years with Annabel. The recollection always begins with the same deathless lines . . .

It was many and many a year ago
In a kingdom by the sea . . .

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

MY SHOPPING DAY

by Ian Rankin

Two things about being a good-looking guy who dresses well: one, you tend to get noticed; two, nobody thinks you capable of a naughty deed. In my line of work—necessarily peripatetic—there's a trade-off between the two. I'm hoping people will be looking at my face and not my hands. And I'm hoping they'll wander off in blissful ignorance afterwards.

I'm a pickpocket, only the term has lost its meaning—fine for Oliver Twist, but not for the 1990s. We're dippers, lifters. I specialise in handbags, shopping bags, carriers. I'm not a weightlifter or a big dipper—a little but often, that's me. I saw a stage act once, he could have the wrist watch off your hand, the belt off your trousers, and you wouldn't notice. He'd have your wallet, your glasses, your wife, your kids, and you'd take a look around and be naked and shivering in a dark alley.

He was that good. I'm not. But I look better than he did; I take care of myself. I went backstage after the show and he was pouring whisky into a glass that wasn't too clean. I got him to go through a couple of moves, thinking I could maybe incorporate them into my act, but nothing came of it. I asked him why, when he could make a fortune in train stations, airports, and cinema foyers, he was wasting his time on the

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stage of a working-men's club in Leven. He said the problem was he needed to show off. He had this gift, and he couldn't keep it quiet. He knew damned well that if he lifted a wallet, he'd want the victim to know about it.

Theatrical types; I've met a few. I'm a bit of an actor myself, of course; have to be. My face is smiling, giving a come-on, and my mouth is saying all this pardon-me-all-my-fault stuff, but my mind is on what my hands are doing, slipping in and out of bags and baskets, palming the purse or the wallet or whatever of value happens to be lying there in plain view or just beyond. I wear expensive aftershave—not that cloying crap you see shagged to death on TV just before Christmas—and when I get close they get a good waft of it. It all helps to keep them occupied—preoccupied—during the performance. That was one lesson the old stooge in Leven taught me: preoccupation. Persuade them they're part of a certain scenario and they'll go along with it. Simple, really.

"In the last ten years, the Scottish writer Ian Rankin has established himself as one of the most talented young British crime novelists," said the recent edition of *St. James Guide to Crime and Mystery Writers*. The series of police procedurals that is primarily responsible for Mr. Rankin's emerging status in the crime field stars Inspector Rebus of the Edinburgh police, a character with a minor role in the following new story. ¶

I frequent the big supermarkets and shopping centres. I see young women clicking their heels and holding clipboards, ready to collar some brain-fried shopper into taking part in their "consumer survey." Right, only what they're really doing is easing you into a pitch for double glazing, new kitchen, conservatory. And people keep taking the bait. I want to scream at them: "Come *on!* Wakey-wakey!" But what use would it do? A trawl up and down those aisles and your head is mush. I know shopping centres don't want you doing it, but just walk in some day and position yourself the safe side of the checkouts. Now stand there and watch the show. Watch a shopper breeze into the shop with head held high, trolley buzzing. Then watch them at the checkout, watch them as they leave. Their skin's turned gray, eyes dark. They frown, their jaw moves, there's almost drool there at the corners. Shoulders slumped, head sagging. These people have been beaten, pummelled. They've been hijacked, gagged, throttled, stymied, shaken, and stirred. On the way home, they'll be argumentative, downright rude, and once home they'll collapse, fight with spouse and kids, maybe have a little weep in the privacy of the toilet. And inside their head will be some shocking refrain, something they can't seem to shrug off without the aid of hard drink. It'll be some synthesized, sanitised, la-la-la singalong hit from the sixties or seventies. The music they shopped to, music you

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don't so much hear as ingest. While you're standing at the checkout, watching the sorry parade, you might want to try *listening* to that music. Believe me, it's hard to do; the music doesn't want you to listen to it. It wants you to feel it, which is a different thing altogether.

Okay, so you're thinking: The best time to lift those purses and wallets is when the shoppers come stumbling out with their trolleys laden, right? Wrong: I take them *inside* the shop, while their minds are at the same time filling with junk and jangling with a mental shopping list. They are seeing novelties they didn't know they needed—chocolate-flavoured pasta; canned caffeine with a free colour-change straw—and almost forgetting washing-up liquid and the kids' dinner. Boom: That's when I bump into them. That's when I brush against their cheap coats as I lean past for that perfect tomato towards the back of the display. That's when I half turn my head, give them the smile, and say something about how crowded the shop is today. Caught a little off guard, they're open to the full effect: dental work, jawline, groomed hair, expensive clothes, sweetened breath, and aftershave. My blue eyes sparkle with the same drops TV presenters use. The hand I've reached past their own wears a Breitling wrist watch, all bells and whistles and 2k of Swiss whatever. I'm working now. See, I don't just have to hold this woman—nearly always a woman—in thrall; I have at the same time to hide what my other hand is doing from other shoppers in the vicinity, some of whom, attracted to the show, will be watching me, watching her, and thinking they'd like to be over by the tomatoes right now instead.

It can take ten or fifteen minutes to size up the punter. They need to be a certain type—that goes without saying—and there has to be something worth nicking from them. I have to make sure nobody knows I'm shadowing them as I pass down the aisles with my handbasket (one or two items in it which I'll ditch later: I don't want to be standing in a checkout queue while my victim finds out she's missing cash and credit cards). So many variables; it's a juggling act, really. And I have to be a good psychologist. And I have to get away.

So you can see, it's not easy money when all's said and done.

But it beats clerical work, no?

Edinburgh had produced a good haul that Saturday. I'd hit three edge-of-town superstores. Saturday afternoons in those places are like hell on earth. Plus, they're either shrewd or tight-fisted on the east coast: no really easy pickings. They keep their money close to them and are suspicious of any stranger—*any* stranger. I blame those market researchers: You never know who's going to turn out to be one. Best-looking man I've ever seen came to my door . . . with the old clipboard and pen. Turned out he was trying to sell carpets. Looked like he was wearing one, too.

That Saturday morning, just to show you I'm not a bad bloke, I'd rejected a wallet which had been held out to me on a plate. There was a blind guy in the first shopping centre, walking the marbled and mir-

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rored halls with confidence and a guide dog. The guide dog was a beauty of a Labrador: I love dogs, always have done. It was early in the day and I was just limbering up, sizing the place and its level of security. So I asked the old guy if I could pat his dog, gave me a chance to take a surreptitious look around. Gorgeous dog it was, come-hither eyes, all that. Nice and solid with a good coat. Liked to be stroked, too. So me and the old guy got talking. He was wearing some tatty old tweed jacket with greasy elbows—mind, I can see that smartness of appearance is problematical when you're blind. Anyway, the jacket was all baggy and worn, and when it swung open as the man leaned down to stroke his Lab, I saw his wallet inside, swinging from a loose pocket. And I could have had it, but he was blind, for Christ's sake, and maybe I just wasn't ready. So I decided to leave it alone. And guess what? He leaned a bit further down and the bloody thing slipped out onto the floor. He didn't seem to have heard it, too busy murmuring sweet nothings to the dog, whose name was Sabre. I picked up the wallet, gave its contents a once-over. Sabre's eyes were on me, but he wasn't saying anything. Seemed like he was on my side.

"You dropped this," I told the old fellow, wedging the wallet into his hand.

Temptation is a terrible thing, though. . . .

Anyway, afternoon shift over, I'd returned to my car and driven it to the furthest corner of the car park to count my haul. I always choose the quietest corner, usually round by the loading bays. Saturday afternoons these aren't usually in use, unless someone's bought a bed or a bike and has driven round to load it into the car. Today, there was a transit van parked nearby, but nobody was in it, and when I looked around I didn't see anyone. So I spread the stuff on the passenger seat and got to work.

There was a guy I knew once called Playtex, partnered him a couple of times. He was called Playtex because he could lift and separate—as in lift people's money and separate them from it. Anyway, his advice was to get away from the scene pronto. But then one day while driving out of the car park, he smacked into a disabled car. There was a cop nearby, and of course Playtex didn't just have cash and plastic in his own car, he had the purses and wallets too, spread all over the place after the impact. Now me, I like to take my time, not panic. Go through everything then and there, that way I can ditch the unnecessaries as soon as possible. The purses and wallets go into a bottle bank if there is one; stick them in a bin and they might be found too soon. ID cards, photo-cards, that sort of thing—same place. Cash and credit cards, cash cards, stuff like that I keep, plus any little things like stamps. These days, of course, nobody's supposed to carry cash, but you'd be surprised. First thing a lot of people do before they start their shopping is visit the bank or the machine: They might need cash for a restaurant, a cup of coffee or a double gin, a taxi home, the TV papers. . . . I get a lot of nice fresh tens and twenties. The plastic I offload to a guy I

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meet three times a week in a pub in Glasgow. It's a hassle, meeting him this often, but he says we have to "strike while the iron is hot." In other words, he needs the cards before they get too old. Some people, so he tells me, will wait up to a week before reporting missing cards, on the chance that they might turn up. Or they simply won't notice they're missing. But all the same, he needs them pronto, so he can maximise their shelf life. He can use cash cards too, though I don't know how. He bypasses the code or something; works a couple of times, then you throw the card away or the machine swallows it.

I'd made not too bad a showing that afternoon. The bottle bank was about ten yards away, so I got out of the car and walked over to it, pushing the leatherware inside. I could smell sour wine and beer slops, and knew I'd be drinking better than either that evening. I was just getting back into my car when I heard the squeal. It was coming from the transit. I heard it again. There was no one in the front of the van, so the sound had to be coming from the back. No windows, so I couldn't be sure. But yes: The whole van rocked suddenly and I heard a thudding sound. Then a voice—definitely a voice this time—a man's, hissing something that sounded very much like, "You won't do that again, you bitch!"

I got back into my car and just sat there, hands resting on the steering wheel. Then I put my window down. I didn't hear anything else. The van was white, mostly, but with a black roof. It looked like a respray. The front grille was crimson and the wing-mirror nearest me was missing. There was a partition behind the seats, blocking off the back. I licked my lips, wondering what was happening in there, wondering what to do about it. This last was easy to answer: nothing. Get the hell away from there and forget about it. I started my engine and slipped into first, crawling from the scene. I'd got as far as the bottle bank when, eyes on the rearview, I saw the transit's back doors swing open. I couldn't see inside; the van had been backed close to a wall. I watched a man jump down and slam the doors shut. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, then put his wrist to his mouth and sucked on it. He was over six feet, black T-shirt, black denims, and a black leather waistcoat. He looked in his forties, long hair thinning badly. When he looked up, he saw my car and seemed interested in it. I started off again, hoping he'd think I'd been paying a visit to the bottle-bank—which, after all, was the truth.

I circled the car park, but ignored the arrows to the exit, instead coming back round to where, from a safe distance, I could again see the transit. The man was moving now, walking towards the superstore's front entrance. He had an awkward, gangling gait, arms swinging low. He reminded me of a guy I'd known years back who'd been the roadie with a third-rate rock band. Same straggly brown hair and overdone sideburns, same sleepless eyes. It wasn't him, it just looked like him.

He disappeared through the automatic doors. I stared towards the van. From this distance, I couldn't see any movement, couldn't hear

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anything. But I knew there was someone in there, some woman. I didn't like to think about what she was doing there. Had he locked the doors after him? I could hare over there and maybe let her out. . . .

If he didn't come back out and find me there. He'd seen me by the bottle-bank. Maybe he was standing in the shop doorway, waiting for me to make a move. A car was moving slowly towards the bottle-bank. It was a shiny black BMW, tinted windows. It didn't stop at the bottle-bank; it made for the van, stopped dead in front of it.

Christ, now what?

A man got out. He wore a cream-coloured suit, well-cut, and a pink polo shirt, plus sunglasses—and I'd bet they were Ray-Bans. His hair was light brown, neatly trimmed, and his jaw made chewing motions. He walked to the back of the transit and, without hesitating, pulled open the doors and jumped in. The doors closed after him.

I sat there frowning, conjuring innocent scenarios. The only one that seemed even remotely feasible was that the roadie-lookalike was a pimp, the BMW a punter, and the woman in the back a prossie. But in all honesty I didn't believe that, not for one minute.

Then the doors of the superstore opened, and this time it was a security guard who came out, two-way held to his mouth. He seemed to be scanning the car park. I knew the score: He wasn't looking for anyone in a transit van; chances were, he was looking for *me*. This time, I followed the exit arrows.

I was staying in a Bed & Breakfast, nicely anonymous on the Dalkeith Road. The front garden had been paved over to create three parking spaces, but mine was the only car there. It was out of season. I'd been asked if I was in town on business, and had answered that I was, the proprietor not seeming to notice that the weekend was a funny time to be conducting business.

There was a bathroom along the hall, and I soaked in a bath for half an hour, eyes closed. My jacket hung from a hook on the back of the door, its inside pocket padded with cash. The plastic was in a brown A4 envelope—sealed—beneath my car's passenger seat. Hotel and B&B rooms were public property, you never knew who'd come traipsing through, or how curious they'd be, so I preferred to keep the stuff in my locked car. The car itself was not worth stealing, not even worth breaking into. There was a yawning gap where a radio should be, and the upholstery was torn and frayed. There were times when it paid not to be showy.

I was reasoning with myself: There was nothing you could do; it would have been too risky; what if there'd been some innocent explanation? Do you want to see yourself in the clink? There was nothing you could do.

I kept coming back to that, trying to convince myself. *You won't do that again, you bitch!* And he'd come out of the van wiping his mouth and sucking his wrist. Had he tried something and she'd bitten him?

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The squeal I'd heard had been the sound of someone in pain. Maybe the man. Maybe her.

Probably her.

The bath was cold before I got out.

That evening, I tried eating Indian, but couldn't summon up an appetite. Instead I drove through the city, wishing I had a radio, something that might take my mind off things. A radio would have been cheap at the price. I found myself back at the "retail park." It looked different at night, eerie, otherworldly. The interiors of the buildings were well-lit, so you could see a lot of merchandise, only no one was buying. The car park was empty, sodium lights overhead deterring ne'er-do-wells. But I drove into the car park anyway. These places used private security firms, but they'd be tucked up inside the stores, and probably wouldn't venture out except in the direst emergency. I saw that there was a single car parked in the car park, a nice-looking Volvo, surrounded by a sea of spaces and the occasional island of metal trolleys. But there was no transit van. I stopped my car in front of where it had been and, headlights full-beam, got out to examine the ground.

I didn't know what I was doing, what I was looking for. Clues? Clues to what? Something that might put my mind at rest, perhaps, but I wasn't sure what would do that. There was nothing, of course, not the least sign that any vehicle had ever been there. Just a wad of gum lying next to the wall. I remembered the man in the BMW had been chewing something; this was probably his. Could I take it to the police? Look at this valuable piece of evidence, Officers! Can you test the saliva for DNA? Will it lead you to a house of slaughter, an evil trade in sex slaves?

Thank you, sir, and could we have your name and profession . . . ?

What was I doing? There had been a noise from a van. A man had yelled something and come out of the van. Another man had gone into the van. So what? I would be leaving town the following day. By tomorrow night, it would all be forgotten. I got back into my car and reversed from the scene.

But as I passed the solitary Volvo, I slowed, then stopped. If someone had been in that van against their will, then maybe they'd been abducted. Abducted from where? From this very car park, perhaps. Which meant their car would still be here, unclaimed at the end of the day. I got out of my car once more and walked around the Volvo. Could have been dumped by joyriders, of course, except how many joyriders opted for Volvos? Again, I didn't know what I was looking for. I glanced around, saw nobody, and took a closer look at the car. No keys in the ignition. Something lying on the passenger seat. What was it? Looked like a letter. I tried to read the name on the envelope, but couldn't. Then I did something crazy—I tried the driver's door. And it wasn't locked. It opened with a soft click, no alarm. An unlocked Volvo: Now I knew something was wrong. I took out the envelope and held it under

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lamplight. There was a man's name on it—Mr. Roger Masson—but no address.

The woman's husband? The car didn't seem about to yield any other clues. I heard a lorry revving, and closed the door to the Volvo, heading back to my own car. I was behind the steering wheel before the lorry came into view. It seemed to be collecting rubbish from one of the other shops. I was driving out of the car park before I realised I still had the envelope in my hand.

I stopped at a pub on Corstorphine Road and asked for the phone book. Saturday night—the place was mobbed. Plenty of good-looking young women, a few giving me interested looks as I stood at the bar. Under normal circumstances, I'd have stayed for a drink, flashed around a bit of money. Maybe I'd have found someone for the night. But tonight, all I wanted was an address. Roger Masson: Barnton Avenue West. Back in my car I checked my A-Z, found the street, and drove there.

Ask me why. Go on, do it. I couldn't give you an answer now, couldn't have done then. It just seemed . . . it seemed a thing to do; maybe not *the* thing to do—certainly not the *sensible* thing to do—but *a* thing to do. And I did it.

Big houses next to a golf course. Very big houses, actually, detached, modern, big gardens. Very nice, and completely silent. It wasn't the sort of street where you'd nip next door for the loan of some coffee; you'd phone the stuff in instead. I stopped the car at the bottom of the drive. The gates were open, and I could see the house clearly. There were lights on inside. Someone walked across a window: a man. He looked worried. He was holding a portable phone to his ear. He held it away from his ear and broke the connection, then rubbed at his forehead. A very worried man. He let his shoulders slump. It was hard to tell from a distance, but he looked in his fifties, if well-preserved. Nice greying hair, open-necked shirt. He seemed to be staring into space, but I realised finally that he wasn't. He was looking out of the window.

He was looking at me.

He turned and walked from the room. The anxious husband, wondering where his wife was. What could I tell him? Nothing. All he'd done was satisfy me that something was wrong. And now that I'd seen his home, I had the feeling maybe the reason why Mrs. Masson had taken her Volvo to the shops this afternoon and not come back was that she'd been unavoidably detained.

By kidnappers.

I watched the front door open, and Masson come running out. He didn't have anything but socks on his feet, and consequently ran on tiptoe down the gravel drive.

"Hey, you!" he was shouting. "I want to talk to you!"

I started the car and moved off.

"Wait a minute! Help, somebody! Help!"

I tore away from there like I had something to fear. Up onto Queens-

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ferry Road and back towards town, missing at least one red light in the process and decidedly ignoring the speed limit.

Which is why the cops caught me.

Flashing blue lights in my rearview, and headlamps flicking to full-beam to tell me to pull over. So what else could I do? I pulled over, easing two wheels up onto the pavement to make room for passing traffic—ever the courteous driver.

I can wing this, I thought. I've not been drinking, and I've no unpaid fines. I can wing this.

"Step out of the car, please, sir."

I stepped out of the car. There were two of them, uniformed, one—the elder—talking to me, the other walking around the car like I was planning to sell it.

"Something wrong, Officers?" The elder blinked at me like I'd been watching too many films.

"Does a red light mean 'go faster'?" he asked, while his partner smirked. I tried a shy grin.

"It was on me before I saw it."

"Been drinking this evening, sir?"

"Not a drop." The younger cop was peering in through the front passenger window. I was all too aware of the plastic in the envelope under the seat. But the envelope was *sealed*: They couldn't open it even if they found it, not without reasonable suspicion. That might not stop them opening it, of course, but at least my lawyer would have a stick to beat them with.

"No?"

I shook my head, breathed out hard, remembered I'd tried eating a curry.

"Was that a madras or a vindaloo?" the older cop asked, not bothering to wait for an answer. His car had a computer on board; a lot of them do these days. Depends where you are; whether the regional force has had enough money in the kitty. He could go and put my licence plate through his machine: It would come up clean. Never buy a dodgy car.

"Just wait there," the youngster said, going to join his partner. So I stood by my car, arms folded, trying not to look guilty as a parade of motorists slowed to watch. The old guy was on his radio. I had a sudden thought: *Masson has called a 999 with my description.* Would he do that? No telling what a man will do when he's desperate. The cops were looking at me through their windscreen, maybe trying to sweat me, get me to run for it. No way, not with the envelope under the passenger seat.

So I stood and waited, and at last they came back, both of them.

"We'd like you to come down to the station," the elder said.

"What? Am I being arrested?"

"Just a routine matter."

"For not stopping at a red light?"

"Routine, sir. If you'll come with us."

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I tried to look disgruntled, appalled—it wasn't hard. "What about my car?"

"My colleague will drive it, sir. If you'll come with me . . . "

I sat mute in the passenger seat all the way to the cop shop.

Police stations are not designed to make you feel like the driven snow, even if the worst thing you've done in your life is try peeping at your sister while she was in the bath. They are like black holes. Once you're in there, to the outside world you've ceased to exist, and the outside world itself ceases to have meaning for you.

That can be frightening. It can loosen tongues. Suddenly you remember about your sister, and blurt it out, dredging up a memory from ten or twenty years ago. You'd tell them anything, these quiet listeners, these stone faces. You'd tell them you once waded through her underwear drawer too, even if this were a downright lie.

I don't have a sister. I wasn't about to tell them anything.

The CID office was big and needed a lick of paint. There were large cracks snaking across the ceiling towards the flickering lengths of centred striplighting. There were six desks, big old bulky things, like school surplus from the Billy Bunter era. And there were detectives, wearing suits and ties and looking like they couldn't wait to knock off. I was seated in front of one of the tables. There was no one sitting across from me. I'd been asked if I wanted a cup of coffee. I'd declined. They didn't want to breath-test me, that much was clear. Nothing else was.

Then the detective came and sat down, pulling his chair in inch by inch till he was happy with the arrangement. He lined three ballpoint pens in a row in front of him. There was a clean pad of paper below the pens.

"Do you know why we've asked you here, Mr. . . ." He looked at a slip of paper in his paw. "Mr. Croft?"

He was not especially tall, but had bulk and confidence. His temples were turning grey; the rest of his hair looked like it would follow soon enough. His eyes were dark, sceptical. He watched me shake my head, then searched his in-tray, at last pulling out a sheet of paper.

"'Six feet one or two,'" he read, "'dark hair, well-groomed, well-dressed, blue eyes, squarish face, good teeth. A nice manner.'" He looked up. "Sound familiar, Mr. Croft?"

"I might know a few women like that."

He allowed a smile. "It could be you, Mr. Croft."

"Could be a lot of people, Sergeant."

"It's Inspector. Inspector Rebus."

"Look," I sat forward, "what is this all about?"

"It's about someone lifting purses out of bags, Mr. Croft."

"Ridiculous." I half laughed. "Good God, where's this supposed to have happened?"

"All over the city. You live here, Mr. Croft?"

"Visiting."

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"When did you arrive?"

"Yesterday evening."

The detective nodded to himself. "Two women came up with this description, Mr. Croft. Two women in two different supermarkets, two different areas of the city."

"I did go to *one* supermarket this afternoon."

"Which one?"

I shrugged. "Cameron Toll, was that it? Somewhere near my hotel."

"Foot of Dalkeith Road?"

I nodded.

"What did you want?"

"Razors, deodorant . . ." I lowered my voice. "Contraceptives."

He ignored my man-to-man admission. "Got the receipt, by any chance?"

I laughed again. "Threw it away."

"What line of work are you in?"

"I'm a photographer." I am too: There's an SLR in the boot of my car. One thing about travelling around the country, I get to take some wonderful photographs. Twice now I've won my camera club's annual prize.

"For a company?"

I shook my head. "Freelance. I can show you my portfolio."

"Don't be disgusting," someone called from across the room. The inspector smiled at that, and I smiled, too. We were beginning to get along just fine.

"There's been some sort of mistake," I said. "Check my hotel room, my car." I gave him my most honest look, dewy eyes and all.

"Why were you in such a rush?"

"Sorry?"

"On Queensferry Road."

"I wasn't in any hurry. But when that road's quiet . . . you can build up a head of steam without noticing."

"Lucky you," the same voice called.

"So you've no objections to us searching your hotel room or your car?"

"None."

He nodded again. "So where's the stuff stashed?"

Bluff! my brain yelled. I stared him out, made sure my smile wasn't wavering. "Look, Inspector . . ."

Someone had answered a phone. Now they called across the room, "John, someone called Masson for you."

My heart dropped like a stone.

The inspector picked up his receiver, pushed a button, and leaned back in his chair.

"Mr. Masson? What can I do for you, sir?" The way he spoke, I knew this Masson had clout to spare. Rebus's face hardened as he listened. "What?" He began writing on his notepad. For the moment, I'd been forgotten. "A pet? When was this?" He listened some more, scribbling furiously. "Why didn't you come to us straight away? What make of car?"

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His writing was appalling, but I read the words "Volvo" and "car park." "And there was no note? Where's your wife now? Can I speak to her, please, sir?"

He put his hand over the mouthpiece. "Be with you in a minute."

I nodded, feeling like my head might actually fall off. Mrs. Masson was coming to the phone! Her husband was bringing her! So she hadn't been in the van. She was nothing to do with it. What had he said about a pet and a note . . . ? My hand went to my jacket pocket. The envelope was still there.

"Mrs. Masson?" Rebus said now. "How are you? Yes, must be terrible. They were supposed to leave a note? Have you seen these men?" He listened, started scribbling again. "You've only spoken to one man? But he spoke in the plural? Well, it might be important, Mrs. Masson. When was this?" He began writing again. I could feel sweat trickling down my back. "No, it's serious, all right, I just wish you'd come to us right at the start. I'd like to come out there and see you." He listened again, scribbled—by now the top sheet of the pad looked like a blackboard at the end of a school day. When he put the receiver down he did so slowly, still writing. Then he got up abruptly and went to talk with someone at the far end of the room.

I slipped my hand into my pocket and felt the envelope. It hadn't been stuck down. I felt inside. Sure enough, there was a sheet of paper there. I eased it out, my face blank, unfolded it on my knee, and read the pencilled capitals.

£2,000 TO GET THE BITCH BACK. GET MONEY READY, WE'LL CALL.

The squeal I'd heard had been human, but it had been the roadie's voice. He'd just been bitten by Mrs. Masson's pet dog: *You won't do that again, you bitch!* Maybe he'd muzzled her, tied her up, knocked her cold. Maybe he'd done worse. If there's one thing I abhor more than the cruelty we inflict on each other, it's cruelty inflicted on animals.

Especially dogs.

It was as clear as day now. Mrs. Masson had been instructed to leave her car in the car park, and to return sometime later, when she'd find a ransom note on the passenger seat. Only I'd chanced by and lifted the bloody note. So now she didn't know what was expected of her and was going up the wall. And her husband, driven by this, had at last called the police—perhaps against her wishes. All she wanted was her dog back. Meantime, I had the note *and* a description of the dognappers. I had more than any of them.

And I was stuck here.

Rebus came back and tore the sheet from his pad, folded it into his pocket. By now the other note was safe in my pocket. He looked at me for a long time, as if trying to place me. I went dewy-eyed again.

"I've got your licence plate, your name, and your address," he said quietly. "I've got everything I need—for the moment. I'll want to talk to you again tomorrow. Be here at ten-thirty, understood?"

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Two choices: stick with innocent bewilderment, or nod. I nodded. Not that I'd be here tomorrow morning: I'd be packed and gone by midnight.

He gave me another long stare. "Your car's outside, get the keys from the desk." He moved away, but paused and turned. "See you tomorrow, Mr. Croft." He made it sound like a threat.

It didn't bother me, I knew I was off and running. That was the only sensible course, I kept telling myself. And I believed it, too.

I sat in my car, hands trembling as they ran over the steering wheel. I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. In the end, I think I did both simultaneously. I leaned down and felt beneath the passenger seat. The envelope was still there. Everyone deserves a lucky break, I thought, starting the engine.

I'd go back to the B&B, pack my things, and never come back.

Wouldn't that be a callous ending?

But as I drove, I thought of the two men and wondered what kind of dog Mrs. Masson owned: something small and snapping, or a big hearty beast fit for walks across the golf course? I hoped for the latter, for something like the blind man's Labrador. I heard the squeal again. It could have been a dog squealing. And the thump I'd heard: Had the roadie smashed its head? My hands tightened on the steering wheel and, first pub I saw, I pulled over and went looking for another phone book.

This time I had a whisky—a good-sized one. Well, they weren't going to stop me twice in the same night, were they? And I needed the courage. I looked up Masson's address and took down his telephone number. I couldn't call from the bar: too noisy. But there was a box fifty yards along the road, and I used that. A man answered, Masson himself, I presumed.

"Inspector Rebus, please."

I heard the man say, "Someone for you," as he handed the phone over.

"Hello?"

"Just listen. You're looking for two men." I gave my descriptions, eyes squeezed shut as I tried to make them as accurate and telling as I could. Then I described the van and the BMW. "And they want two grand. They'll probably be phoning later."

Rebus had listened to this in silence. Now he spoke.

"Mr. Croft, is that you?"

This time my heart sank like something altogether more massive than a mere stone. A block of city granite, maybe.

"Was it your car Mr. Masson saw?" Rebus went on.

I licked dry lips. "Yes," I said.

"Are you mixed up in this?"

"Only as a . . . well, I saw the van. I thought I heard something. I was worried, so I went back tonight."

"You found the note?" He sounded amused.

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"Yes."

"Why didn't you come forward?" He caught himself. "No, stupid question. Thanks for your call."

"Do you still want me at the station tomorrow?"

"Were you planning on coming?"

"It doesn't really fit with my schedule."

"Get out of the city, Mr. Croft. Don't ever come back."

"Inspector, one question—what breed is she?"

There was a pause while the detective checked. "Persian Blue," he said at last.

"What?"

"Persian Blue."

"But that's a cat."

"Sorry?"

"A cat."

"That's right."

"I *hate* cats!"

I slammed the phone down, went back to the B&B, and packed my suitcase in a blind fury. I had paid till noon Sunday, so there was no problem. I just left my key behind, got back into the car, and drove. I was heading down Dalkeith Road, making for the city bypass, when I saw the van. I blinked, shook my head, but it was definitely the van. I knew not only from the black roof, the missing wing-mirror, but because it was being shadowed by a black BMW. They were going around a roundabout as I approached it. I watched them turn off, then followed. Cameron Toll Shopping Precinct. They were driving into the car park, the only vehicles around at that time of night. I switched off my lights and hung back, watching as they came to a stop. The roadie got out of the van, and was joined by Mr. Smooth, who checked his watch. There was a wall-mounted telephone close by. The roadie opened the back of the van and got in. After checking his watch again, rocking on the balls of his feet, Mr. Smooth got in too, closing the doors after him. I kept my lights off and lifted my foot from the brake, rolling down the slight incline towards them, keeping going until my front bumper touched their rear. My car's a big old Merc, same axle height as a transit. They felt the impact and tried opening the doors, only they were jammed shut by my radiator grille. I got out and jumped up onto my bonnet, my face close to the inch-wide gap in the transit's rear doors.

"A female cat isn't called a bitch!" I screamed at them.

I might have screamed it more than once, actually, before getting down and going to the telephone. ●

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BY LAWRENCE BLOCK

The Blank Card
BY JEFFERY DEAVER

Director's Cut
BY LOREN D. ESTLEMAN

Details
BY KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

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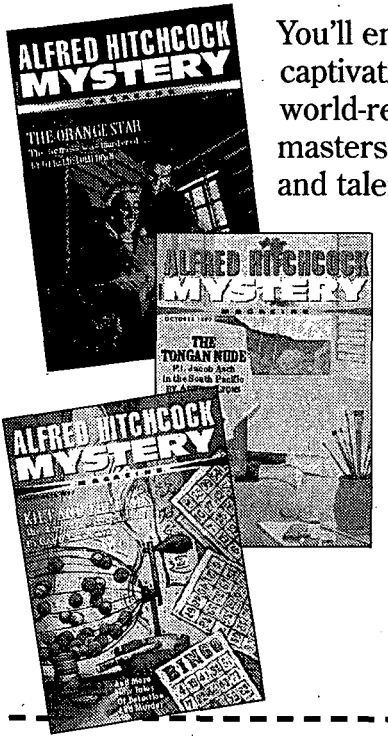

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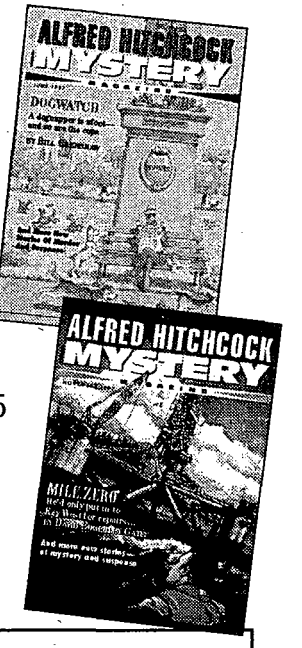

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SKIN CARE UPDATE

The "hidden" problem that forces millions of women to wear pants... and the natural solution!

Formerly available only through dermatologists, this amazing cream eliminates ugly spider veins in just weeks.

by Melinda Walthington

It's estimated that half of the adult female population is plagued by spider veins! Small, thin veins lying close to the skin's surface, spider veins are red or blue in color. They may appear in true "spider" fashion, with web-like groups of veins radiating out from a central area, they can look like fine lines or appear in "starburst" clusters. Although men are not immune to spider veins, they are overwhelmingly a female problem. Unlike large, bulging varicose veins that can cause pain and even lead to serious health problems, spider veins are primarily a cosmetic problem.

Not even proper diet and exercise are guaranteed to prevent unsightly spider veins. They tend to be hereditary, and worsen as we age. Aside from changing the way you dress, using concealing makeup or resorting to expensive treatments, there has been little you could do to get rid of spider veins—until now!

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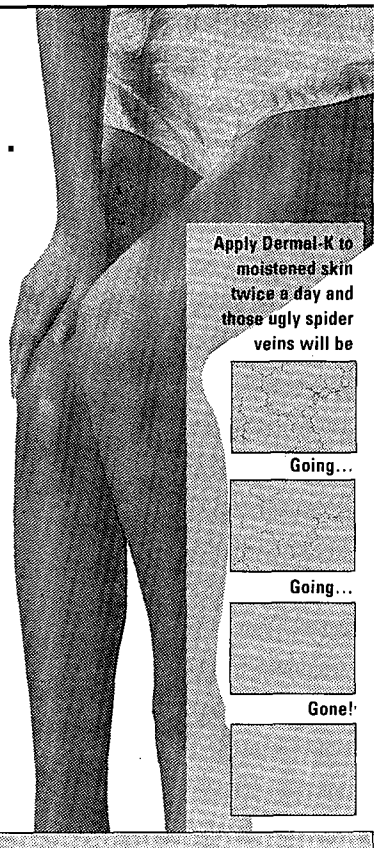

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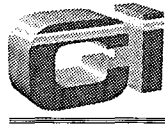

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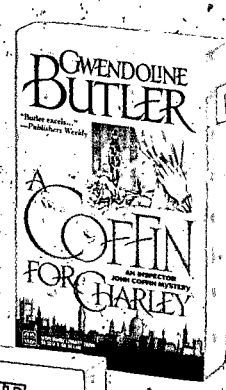

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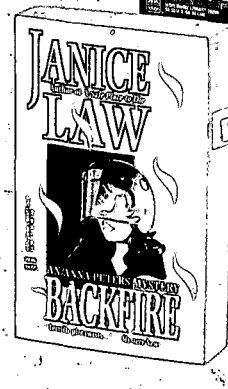

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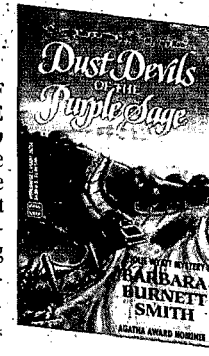

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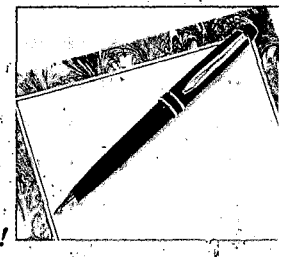

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